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CutBank
Department of English
University of Montana
Missoula, MT
59812

cutbank@umontana.edu
www.umt.edu/cutbank

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Josh Emmons

Orange curtains slid apart and Iratxe's faint brown reflection curved outward in the opening windows. Like all the other women, she wore a white uniform and white tennis shoes and no makeup and an absent look cut with mastery of the task at hand. Her hair was forced into a glossy ponytail and tendrils blackened the edge of her forehead. While she worked her hair tie came undone by the millimeter; she refastened it and picked up a torn package of instant coffee that left a light gun powder trail on the floor as she walked to the wastebasket, which had been moved from its regulation spot beside the desk. Then she sat on the microcouch and her mouth moved as though in conversation or song, her left foot tapping her right. Seven minutes later she got up and finished cleaning the room and I closed my stinging eyes.

When I took the job as a surveillance monitor at the Gaslighter Motel my whole life seemed in retrospect to have been building toward tragedy. For most of elementary school I'd had only two friends—twin brothers who shared a rare heart condition for which they were frequently in the hospital—and so during recess did nothing but watch the other kids. Therefore I was nicknamed, in a cruel way, the Umpire, and, being very small, beaten up regularly. For high school I transferred to a different district and joined clubs and made lots of friends and vowed never again to be as alone or observant as I'd been as a child. After graduating I worked on the factory floor of a shipping company, always surrounded by people, until I turned thirty-

four and started dating a woman who wanted me to do something white collar and so urged me to respond to an online want ad that read: "MOTEL SERVICES, office job requires an eye for detail, good pay and benefits, f/t."

Julio Ramirez, manager and acting human resources director of the Gaslighter, thanked me for coming to the interview and I thanked him in return. We both smiled and then stopped. As at other travel lodges in the area, he said, holding my resume in both hands, some people had started renting rooms at his motel in which to cook up potent batches of methamphetamines. Did I know of this phenomenon? To the untrained eye, these sick degenerates were hard to identify. If they had open facial sores or twitched or were obviously high, the front desk knew to alert the authorities, but many of them hid their illegal agenda behind a clear complexion and steady voice. When they finished making this drug in the rooms, they left behind mounds of pseudoephedrine boxes and broken Bunson burners and blast radii of scorched carpet like craters on the moon. The Gaslighter, therefore, said Julio, through a special arrangement with the Drug Enforcement Agency, had just installed microscopic surveillance cameras in all the rooms in order to catch these sorry degenerates in the act. My job, if he were to offer and I were to accept it, would be to sit in an observation chamber and watch four video monitors systematically rotate through all fifty-two rooms at the Gaslighter.

"Isn't that illegal?" I asked.

"I told you," said Julio, slowly, like a teacher responding to a question he'd already answered, "we have a special arrangement."

"But can the police really enter someone's motel room without a warrant?"

"Perhaps this job isn't for you."

"It's for me."

"I need someone who can follow orders."

"That's me. I love orders."

Julio gave me the job the next day, and a month later my girlfriend moved to Sacramento with a friend of her father's.

The second time I noticed Iratxe, when at six-thirty in the morning I was getting

ready to go home and she was cleaning the room of a guest who'd left early with no luggage, she stopped in the middle of vacuuming to remove a pocket diary from her supply pushcart. Her mouth moved and she wrote something down, pausing between phrases to chew on the end of her pencil. It seemed that she was writing down song lyrics and I wished the video had sound. How nice it would be to hear a song in the making.

During the nine months I worked at the Gaslighter Motel, I only saw two guests manufacture crystal meth. On both occasions Julio said that his contact at the DEA was too busy to come make the bust, and that we would have to let the them get away with it this time. He sounded weary and defeated, as though after decades of trying to make the world a better place he had finally admitted that it was impossible. However, we had, he said, done all we could and should not blame ourselves for what the drug was doing to our community and neighbors and loved ones. I, especially, was to be applauded for alerting him as quickly as I did.

Instead of produce drugs, most guests simply unpacked, charged their phones, slept, watched TV, played cards, ate, stretched, drank, packed, undressed, dressed, and performed a wide range of sexual acts. For instance, I saw seven or eight thousand incidents of masturbation. Thousands of couples having sex. Dozens of threesomes. One foursome. Four fivesomes. With the lights on and the lights off, clothed and naked, with dogs, in costumes, with professional bondage gear, with minors, with the elderly, with toys, interracial, on camera, in and on top of and beneath the bed, lubed and dry, choreographed, awkward, beautiful, obscene, violent, somnolent, involving bodily waste products, involving tears and post-coital prayers.

It soon became clear that Julio, having sworn me to secrecy about my job in accordance with the special DEA arrangement, used the log I kept of each room's activities to locate and preserve every second of video footage that could be cleaned up and doctored into salable pornography. Stopping by in the mornings when my shift ended, he would scan my log, written discreetly but unmistakably, and say, "Another night without any sick degenerates, thank god." Then he would shake my hand and sometimes give me a fifty-dollar bonus "for diligence on the job," with a

great brotherly grin. I knew what the money was for and so perhaps became a type of unspoken accomplice.

Iratxe stopped wearing a wedding ring in the middle of my sixth month on the job. When carrying a dry-cleaned suit she held it above her head so that its bottom didn't scrape the ground. She never lingered over forgotten items in the rooms. Never scratched herself or failed to vacuum under the chairs. One morning in my ninth month she lay face-up on the bed of Room 215 and flapped her arms and legs like a child making angel patterns in the snow. Then she got up, smoothed her outfit, and finished cleaning.

She looked a few years younger than me and, like the other cleaning women, probably spoke no English, but she seemed to harbor romantic impulses that beat synchronously with mine, and she was apparently a songwriter or at least interested in music, and she resembled Frida Kahlo, and at a certain moment I decided that we might, under the right circumstances, fall in love. I told Julio one morning, while folding a stack of five-dollar bills into my small wallet, that Iratxe was a very good maid.

"Yes," Julio said, underlining something in the log.

"Did she get a divorce recently?" I asked.

"Who?"

"Iratxe."

"Iratxe who?"

"The maid we're talking about."

"She was married to my cousin, but he left her. She is very controlling, very small-minded. I am going to fire her."

"Why?"

"I only hired her as a favor to my cousin when they had twins and needed more money."

"She has children and you're going to fire her?"

"A man in my position must do many regrettable things. All managers do."

That night I got off work to attend the wedding of a friend who took me aside

at the reception and asked when it would be my turn, because I was becoming one of those aged bachelors whom people half pity and wholly avoid. In my lonely apartment and lonely job. Was that where I wanted to be? "God," he said, reeling on two legs, "you've got to become a participant and quit lurking on the sidelines." He seemed to grow less balanced as we stood there, so I put my arm around his shoulder. "I mean," he said, "it only gets worse from here on out. Worse and worse."

Two days later Iratxe placed two mints on pillows instead of the regulation one. She shampooed carpets by hand. Replaced plastic daisies on office tables with real ones. Wiped down televisions and flipped over mattresses and disinfected telephone handles with Lysol. She scrubbed the bathroom floors' grout with a toothbrush, her hand moving back and forth along the tiles' stitching, the trails of resulting white like dynamite fuses burning in reverse. The rooms grew lighter and she dumped out the water and consolidated her cleaning materials.

When Julio came to collect the night's log I showed him Iratxe in action, pointed out her diligence on the job, the way she put much more care and energy into her work than any other cleaning woman. Surely this helped the case for her remaining at the Gaslighter more than his cousin's complaints hurt it. "That bitch," he said, tucking the log under his arm and shaking his head. "I have told her to get gone from here."

"You fired her already?"

He left the room and slammed the door behind him. I quickly followed and caught up with him in room 204, where he ripped the electrical cord of the vacuum cleaner Iratxe was using out of the wall socket. After so many months of seeing the machine move about soundlessly on video, I'd forgotten the hateful wailing sound it made, even as it died down. Julio grabbed Iratxe's arm and dragged her toward the door, spitting Spanish at her like an angry priest exorcising a demon. Iratxe said nothing, submitted docilely to her mistreatment until she was outside the room. Then, beginning to cry, she said something in Spanish. Julio looked at her and then turned to me.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Give her her job back," I said.

Iratxe stared at me curiously, as though slowing down the words in her head to make sense of them.

"You are not concerned in this matter."

"I'm prepared to tell the police what I do here."

"They know all about the special arrangement."

"They don't know anything about it."

"They certainly do."

"Then I'll confirm it for them."

Julio shrugged and in a kinder voice than before spoke to Iratxe, who wiped away her tears and walked away. He stared after her from the doorway and said, without looking at me, "I will give you one thousand dollars a week on top of your regular salary, beginning now."

"I won't be bought."

"Eleven hundred.

"Hire Iratxe back."

"I cannot do that. Eleven-fifty and we never discuss this again."

Expecting to come to my senses at any second, I watched Julio walk away. I looked around as though I'd just woken up from sleepwalking. Eleven hundred and fifty dollars a week. In the pushcart sitting in the middle of the room I found a small pocket diary filled with Spanish, some of which was arranged in stanzas, the rest in standard prose. I flipped the vacuum cleaner on. In one corner of the room was a circular burn mark in the carpet, and it was as though after decades of trying to make the world a better place I'd admitted that it was impossible, and I said, "No, I won't be bought," which in the roar of the machine's noise sounded like nothing at all.

I went home and slept fitfully, waking up every hour to turn on the television and watch a movie or crime show or congressional debate. I went to work that evening and after two hours of looking at adults slump down on worn stained furniture and kids run around frenetically, no one satisfied, no one capable of such a condition,

all the deflation of human beings at night when their best ideas and selves are long gone, I decided that I couldn't be there anymore, that if I did it would get worse and worse. I stood up and cleared out my things—a hard plastic water bottle, a bag of potato chips, a deck of cards—and went to Julio's office.

"What do you mean you're leaving?" he said. "We have a special arrangement."

"Not anymore."

He licked his lips and squinted at me, quickly assessing everything. "Twelve hundred. I will pay you that every week on top of everything else. Untaxed, this is an offer you can't refuse and you know it."

"Where does Iratxe live?"

"Why do you concern yourself with her? She is a terrible maid. She takes too-long breaks and unless she thinks she's about to be fired she cleans poorly."

"Tell me where she lives. That's all I want."

Julio stood up and came over to me. "Sit, please," he said, turning a chair.

"No."

"Iratxe has gone back to my cousin. There is no need for you to do what you contemplate doing. They had a reconciliation. With her twins and without a job, she is back in his home."

"Then you'll hire her back."

"My cousin would hurt you. It is for this that I will not tell you where she is. I admit that they are not back together, but he is a sick man. A sick degenerate man. You do not want to get involved in that sordidness, not a decent man like you."

I left his office and he called after me that even if we no longer had a special arrangement, I shouldn't do anything foolish or cruel. I owed him this. Please! he yelled.

Outside I got in my car and there was no escape from the sordidness. Not really. It was everywhere, hidden and out in the open, during the night and during the day, alone and together. We watchers saw this confirmed again and again. As I sat in my idling car it began to rain. I moved to turn on the wipers when I noticed two mints placed above them on the windshield. I got out and grabbed them and

looked around and sitting on a bench beneath the bus awning fifty feet away was Iratxe. I grabbed her diary from the car and walked over to the bus shelter, careful to shield it beneath my shirt.

"Hola," I said.

"Hola," she said, shivering. She uncrossed her arms when I brought out her diary. Accepting it with her eyes cast down, she counted all the pages and then, satisfied, stuffed it in her coat pockets.

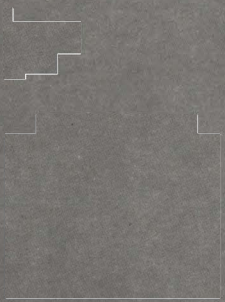
I'd exhausted my Spanish and yet stood there as though waiting to be struck with fluency, as though with enough desire and good will I might like some entranced Pentecostal be able to speak a language I'd never known before. She smiled and I smiled and the sordidness seemed to be only half the picture; looking to the right and left and up and down, one could see examples of something else, something else altogether. Iratxe shrugged her shoulders and I did the same—I felt like a mime, able only to mimic—and then, because hope for the impossible fades so quickly, I turned around and walked away.

"Hey!" she said, and when I looked around she was grinning widely, the happiest I'd ever seen her, the opposite of someone who had been abandoned and fired and left to crumple beneath the weight of too many responsibilities. "I never thanked you for this morning. Or for tonight."

Walking back I said nothing, for like a reflection curving outward I was getting lighter and lighter until finally the rain stopped and I figured out where to begin.

Reva

Jenny Dunning



We knew something had changed before we got downstairs. Our house didn't smell like morning. On the stair landing, the three of us paused to sniff, gathering ourselves up the way you do before entering a place for the first time. We bunched the loose fabric of our matching nighties in our hands, the nighties with tiny roses on them that our mother had laid out on our beds the night before.

The air, as we crossed through the living room, was thick and smoky. In the corner, the branches of our Christmas tree drooped and the ornaments looked dull in the dim light from lamps that had been draped with tapestries. A murky, strange smell mixed with the pine scent. A cat—we didn't have pets—streaked across the room and disappeared under the sofa.

In the kitchen, a woman we didn't know sat at our table with her back to us.

We were used to sitters, usually college girls who looked like we wanted to look one day: long hair in feathered, Farah-Faucet cuts, sparkly make-up, designer-label clothes we were still too small for. We knew how to get these girls to do what we wanted. We told them about how we never knew when we'd see our dad now that he'd moved in with his secretary, about how our mother had gotten a job working for a podiatrist, a word we had learned to pronounce in four careful syllables—pod-i-a-trist—and how she went to school nights for nursing. Then the sitters would go along. They gave us the answers to our homework and ordered pizza in the afternoons and took us to the ice cream parlor near campus. If they hesitated, we'd start to dial our mother's work number.

But the woman in our kitchen wasn't a college girl. Even from the back we could see that. Her backside bulged out beyond the chair and her hair—we'd never seen so much hair. The single loose braid, dull brown mixed with gray, couldn't hold it all in. From the doorway, we could smell the sour dough smell that we later came to associate with her, but maybe that's wrong; maybe what we smelled then was the absence of our mother, the gardenia scent that always preceded her and lingered after she was gone.

The woman spoke without turning around. "I'm Reva."

We stood at the door, waiting. When the tea kettle on the stove whistled, she rose from the chair and lifted it, streamed steaming water into her mug. Despite her bulk, she moved like someone walking through water, all the layers of clothes she wore swishing—three skirts on top of each other, from what we could tell, and a lumpy blouse with a lopsided cardigan, one sleeve and one bottom edge longer than the other, as if made for two different people. "Your mother," she said, cupping her mug in two hands and turning toward us, "has gone away for a rest. She'll be back on New Year's Day."

The youngest of us, Lizzie, started to whimper. How could we adjust to any more changes? But Reva paid no attention. She sat down again and sipped her tea as if we weren't there. Not knowing what else to do, we sat across from her and stared at her face, which was, like the rest of her, oversized, sloppy and fleshy, like soft clay that might be reshaped. You could see the pores in her skin.

No one spoke until, finally, one of us said, "Our mother fixes our breakfast."

"I'm not your mother," she said.

Eventually we put our own pop-tarts in the toaster, but the aroma wasn't comforting like when our mother did it. In that strange atmosphere, the pastries smelled too sweet.

It was the last week of Christmas break, when we would have usually played with friends, slept over at each others' houses, met at the mall in the bigger town just north of ours. But we didn't call our friends or pick up the phone when it rang. We went where Reva went, places we'd never been even though we'd lived in Ellisville

our whole lives. Sitting on the torn-up back seat of her old green van, which didn't have seatbelts, we slammed against each other in one direction and then the other as she drove the curving roads. Our stomachs jumped, then settled, jumped and settled, when the van plunged and rose over the hills.

She took us to graveyards—but not those like where our grandma was, in our mother's words, laid to rest, places with grass mowed short and vases of plastic flowers in front of each stone. No, the cemeteries Reva took us to were untended. The ground dipped where the graves were. To get to them we had to tromp across winter woods and pastures, past sticker bushes, up steep stairs cut into rock.

In the oldest ones, the ages of the dead were listed to the day: *Joseph E., son of J.O. & Ana Giles, died 1 Oct. 1856, aged 1 year 2 ms. 13 ds.* When there were only dates, Reva subtracted them, pointing out the graves of children who had died at seven, nine, eleven, our ages.

In one place, the stones lay flat on the ground in even rows divided into two sections. We read the names aloud, doing our best to pronounce them: from one side, Melvin Orloff, Rene Goethals, Goldie DeGarmo, Alva Throckmorton, Floyd Hambin Joseph, George Bakerich, Ernest Elk, Walter Limbiewicz, Mike Kubala; from the other, Willa Leport, Dorothea Maynard, Ophelia Brancks, Laberta Liberatore, Mary Swazcy, Sadie Postlethwait, Teresina Veeney. "Why," we asked Reva, "is it girls' names on one side and boys' on the other? Why are all the last names different?" Our grandma, we knew, was buried next to our grandpa, who had died before we were born; they shared one stone—the second date for our grandma had been left blank for all those years.

"Their families didn't want them," Reva said. "They lived most of their lives in the asylum, and were buried here when no one claimed them." Descending the stairs, we clustered close to her, tripping up in her skirts, and she paused for us to sort ourselves out. Even in the cool air, that sour, yeasty smell rose up from her.

Christmas had been warm for Ohio—so warm we had worn tee-shirts outside in the lulls between rainstorms—and it had rained every day for more than a week. The streams running alongside the roads Reva drove had swelled over their banks. They looked crayoned-in gray over whatever was there, trees and other things we

couldn't see. The water tore downstream, carrying along branches and bottles and styrofoam cups and even whole tree trunks.

On one of these drives, a barricade blocked the road ahead of us as we dropped down a steep hill: DANGER HIGH WATER, the sign read. The engine of the old van sputtered as Reva slowed, and we held our breath, hoping she would stop. She leaned forward, almost touching the windshield, and, as if she had been able to see something we hadn't, swerved around the barrier.

Ahead, the wet road glinted. "We shouldn't . . . It said . . . " we protested.

"Nothing risked, nothing gained," Reva said. Her voice was deep and raspy, like water running over gravel.

When we crossed the flooded sections, we held our feet in the air, as if that might keep us from stalling. And we didn't stall. Each time the van skated through. The weight of Reva's body was enough to hold us down.

When Reva finally pulled into a parking area and we piled out, the sensation of solid earth under our feet took us by surprise. She never discussed our destinations ahead of time, nor any purpose, but we had a vague sense that she expected us to extract some lesson from these outings. We were at some sort of state park, and, as usual, Reva set out without commentary while we scrambled to keep up. Big as she was, Reva never got winded. When the trail split, she took the right fork, the one that went straight up. Every so often, there were signs warning hikers not to leave the trail and not to climb the rocks. Our mother would have called our attention to these, and we would have ignored them, thrilling at her shrieks when we climbed up the sheer faces or tottered on high ledges. But with Reva we knew better: she wasn't going to protect us. We kept to the trail, struggling with each step to lift our stone-heavy legs.

Reva stopped when she reached the trail's high point, and breathed out a stunned "oohh." When we caught up, we saw why: We were standing on the rim of a jagged cut of rock that plunged down so far that the trees at the bottom looked miniature. Reva smiled, showing her yellow, crooked teeth. "It's called a hollow," she said.

She continued on, along what didn't seem to be a trail at first, only the rocks that formed the cliff. We walked as far from the edge as possible, letting bushes scrape

against our legs. Reva got ahead of us. When we caught up, she was standing in front of a ribbon of bright yellow tape, peering down into the gorge.

"There," she said as we reached her. "That's where he fell." Clutching her skirts, we looked where she was pointing. Halfway down, on a flat rock jutting out from the cliff we could see an uneven pattern of red-brown blotches outlined by yellow tape.

"Did he die?" we asked. In the woods, a high-pitched kuk kuk kukkeekeekeeke ekeekeekeekuk kuk rang out and we huddled closer.

"He did," she said.

"When, when did it happen?"

"Yesterday."

We asked who it was, but she didn't know.

All week, temperatures had been falling. The damp of our sweat from the climb, now that we had cooled down, chilled us. We pressed up against the warmth of Reva's torso. Although we had learned complaining went nowhere with her, when Lizzie said, near tears, that she wanted to go home, Reva turned back, retracing our steps rather than leading us the longer way around.

On the day of our final outing with Reva, temperatures had fallen to below freezing and snow dusted the trees and grass. A gray skin had formed over the flooded fields we drove by. On the path she led us down, ice made the way slick and we fell on the inclines, slid down to bottom and pulled ourselves up by grabbing hold of a nearby tree. The waterfall we passed had metamorphosed into a tangled mane of ice, each strand a braided glass rope. Breaking off spines from adjacent icicles, we let them melt in our mouths.

There were only a few stones, hardly a cemetery really, at the place where she stopped, on a thin level strip projecting from the ridge. It wouldn't have taken much for them to topple down. One was knocked over. Letters were carved into it, so eroded the only ones we could make out were *f-o-l-l-o*—follow, we decided, tracing the possible w on the stone.

We hadn't noticed the backpack Reva was wearing until she slipped it off and extracted a roll of thin, black paper and chunks of gold-colored crayons. Giving us

each one, she spread the paper over the stone. "Go ahead," she said, "hold the wax on its side and rub back and forth."

Each of us starting in a corner, we did. When our gold streaks met and filled the space, we pulled back and stared. The words stood out clearly:

Remember man as you pass by
As you are now so once was I
As I am now so you must be
Prepare for death and follow me.

Our parents had not allowed us to attend our grandma's funeral, but our mother had taken us to the funeral home to say goodbye. "See," our mother had said, lifting us up one by one to peer into the box, "she just sleeping. She's smiling a little, see there? That's because she's going to wake up in a better place." Our mother had given us each a pink carnation to lay on Grammy's chest before blowing her a goodbye kiss.

We read the poem aloud and when we got to the last line, to the word prepare, Reva lay down alongside the grave. The narrow ledge of ground was just wide enough to accommodate her large body. One by one, we joined her, oldest to youngest, stacked up against the hillside, absorbing each others' warmth.

As the week progressed, the Christmas tree dropped its needles on the living room rug. Our new dolls grew disheveled, their clothes torn and hairstyles ruined. Dirty laundry mounded on the floors where we'd thrown it. We no longer wore clothes in the coordinated combinations we'd selected at the stores, but put on anything we could find—summer tee-shirts underneath the ripped sweatshirts our father had left behind, tights and knee socks under capri pants when we'd run out of jeans, reds with greens and yellows, stripes with plaids. Uncombed, our hair—all three of us had long, wavy blonde hair that our mother would brush out each morning and evening and braid in two tight braids—formed knotty clumps.

Bowls and plates lay all around, on the coffee table, the floor, under the beds. Any

remnants of food had been licked clean by Reva's cats. We couldn't tell how many there were because they scattered as soon as we came into a room. They dug into the underside of the couch to make a den and spread the stuffing around the house. Their muddy paw prints edged our tub. We caught them lapping from the water glasses beside our beds. When we opened the door, they darted in or out, sweeping between our legs. On our pillows, they left tiny carcasses—birds and moles, once the head of a mouse with black bead eyes, its bloodless heart bulging out its mouth. The smell of cat pee from the piles of dirty clothes pinched our noses.

Reva liked to play games: chess, Scrabble, Chinese checkers, Yahtzee, Parcheesi. When we moved carelessly, not thinking past the next play, she did not raise her eyebrows dramatically or clear her throat as our mother might have, but took control of the game. Nor did she peer over the stands that held our letters to suggest possible words when we were stuck, or urge us to move a piece to safety, or allow us an extra roll when our dice didn't add up to anything.

For meals, there were pots of soup she kept simmering on the stove that tasted sweetish and spicy and foreign. We ladled the goop into bowls; when we swallowed, the slimy parts slid down our throats before we could chew them. We hunted out the packages of cookies and leftover Halloween candy our mother had hidden in the backs of the cupboards, and ate all the ice cream in the freezer. When that was gone, we just ate Reva's soups, with the odd flat bread she baked.

At night we watched shows our mother never would have let us watch—*Ghost Story* and *Night Gallery* and *Sixth Sense*, shows that made us grab each others' hands and close our eyes. We fell asleep to Johnny Carson's voice on *The Tonight Show*, and woke up frightened from our dreams.

On the afternoon of New Year's Eve, we found Reva rummaging through the box of rags our mother used for cleaning. She reached in and pulled them out one by one, shaking them loose: our father's Ohio State tee-shirt, torn squares of sheets, an apron, a pair of boxer shorts, a night gown we had each worn as toddlers. "This will work," she said, when she got to the night gown. "And this"—she plucked out a baby-sized pillowcase, pink with gold edging.

Next we knew, she had the sewing machine set up and was stitching shut the bottom of the gown and the sleeves. Along the top of the pillowcase she sewed some yellow fringe she found in our mother's sewing basket. Then she told us to ball up sheets of newspaper for stuffing. She attached the head to the body with needle and thread. She used a marker to draw eyes and an O mouth.

Finished, she held it up to us. "What do you hope for the New Year?" she asked.

We all wanted the same things: We wanted our mother to return home, home the way it used to be; we wanted our parents back together; we wanted our mother there when we got home from school; we wanted to hear her fluty voice singing our questions back to us; we wanted to breathe the smell of Grammy's kitchen, ripe peaches and gingerbread baking; we wanted to sit the three of us balanced on our father's knees listening to stories about Ginnie Giraffe and Katie Kangaroo and Lizzie Llama.

On the floor in front of us Reva spread out colored markers. "Write it on the doll," she said.

We wrote it, everything we could think of: We wanted a little dog; we wanted all A's in school; we wanted more friends, different friends; we wanted no chores; we wanted a mall, right there in our town; we wanted a foot of snow, a week of snow days; we wanted double chocolate chip brownies; we wanted our favorite teacher for every grade; we wanted the carnival to set up permanently; we wanted watermelon jelly beans; we wanted new clothes, only new clothes; we wanted summer all year round; we wanted caramel apples; we wanted Saturday mornings every day; we wanted to ride roller coasters, bungee jump, and spelunk. Our lettering, the same shapes formed in different sizes, covered the skirt, the back, the chest, even the face of the doll. The sprawling lines overlapped until none of it was legible.

New Year's Eve night, we sucked on candy sticks, the flavors changing from tangerine to blueberry to bubble gum to root beer as we worked our way down the spirals. That afternoon, Reva had taken us to the candy shop and let us pick

out whatever we wanted. We ate ourselves sick, scraping candy dots off paper rolls with our teeth, gnawing on jawbreakers, plying caramel off the roof of our mouths with our tongues.

An hour or so before midnight, Reva asked us to carry up logs from the woodpile out back. We didn't use the fireplace, we told her, not since our father had left. "Just get the wood," she said and when we brought it up, one or two pieces at a time, she built a tower, alternating the layers so the logs lay crossways, front to back, and crossways again. She said, "Fires need plenty of breathing room." Then we scrunched up newspaper and stuffed it underneath. It lit with a whoosh that subsided once the paper had burned, but the bark still smoldered. She blew on it, making it flare up in spots.

Pulling out a box of sparklers, she led us outside to the front lawn where she held matches to them and handed them to us. We danced and wrote letters in the air. When the box was empty, she said, "Now it's time."

Inside, she retrieved the doll.

"What will we do with it?" we asked.

"Burn it. Are you ready?"

Without answering, we followed her back to the fire, which was now smoldering, the logs glowing red.

"It's too big to fit," we said. But she was already shoving it in, jabbing it with the iron poker. Flames engulfed it and, suddenly, the whole doll shot up the chimney. The flames died back and large black flakes like pieces of bark circled in the space at the base of the chimney; below, the red-hot embers crumbled into ash.

The last time we had seen our father—a night he took us bowling—he told us he wanted to be cremated. We thought at first that must have something to do with sweets. "I won't be buried with your mother and grandparents now," he explained. "What I want is for my ashes to be scattered over Mt. Washington in New Hampshire, where I used to hike with my uncle." We hadn't known he had done that. He'd never told us.

Now, as our wishes ascended on boats of ash and turned into smoke that caught in our throats, we wondered what happens when one thing becomes another: does

it still exist? Maybe even then we knew that we would not grow up to be who we had thought we would.

"Reva," we asked, "what about our wishes now?"

If Reva responded, we didn't hear because we were listening to the sirens grow louder and louder. Outside, fire trucks pulled up in front of our house. We ran out the door and when we turned, flames were shooting from our chimney and falling, dancing on the roof like fireworks. Yellow-suited firefighters swarmed across our yard, some pulling hoses from the truck closest to our house, while others crossed the street to the fire hydrant. A giant in full gear—all glossy black and yellow, a metal tank gleaming on its back, face masked, looking like nothing human—approached us. When a gloved hand removed the helmet and pushed the hood back, a woman's face was revealed. Squatting down at our level, she asked us if anyone else was inside the house and, when we shook our heads, told us to sit on the bench swing in the front yard, well away from the commotion, and not move. Reva, standing on the other side of the yard, appeared small, insubstantial. We watched as silver arcs shot up over our house and rained down on the flames. In the cold, steam rose from the water. Breathing, we tasted smoke and mist.

Myth

W. Tsung-yan Kwong

In deep slumber, Yufei dreams of her aunties, all seven of them, so many she can't keep their names straight—Auntie Huan, Auntie Tiantian, Auntie Zhongxin, Auntie...—combing one another's bone-straight hair, listening about one another's schoolgirl crushes, sharing a basket of fried peanuts. As in most dreams, there is no plot, but instead, a distinct impression is given—a sense of warmth and camaraderie displayed in a scatter of images: interlocked fingers digging within a pail of persimmons, a palm cupped to an ear to hold a secret, countless feet splashing in a water basin on a hot summer day. Even when her alarm clock pulls her away from such impressions, Yufei tries to hold onto them, jotting down in a notebook descriptions of the deep, orange hue of the persimmons, the tickling of a sister's foot mid-splash.

Still, even as she rinses her face with a handful of ice-cold water, the laughter, the chatter, the whispers between the sisters in her dream lingers with her, like an echo, slowly diminishing with volume with each passing minute, but today, the sounds are so real, she checks her radio alarm just to make sure she has turned the dial off, then checks her portable-CD-player headphones, just to be certain the delicate hum isn't emanating from the foamed speakers. Sticking her wet pinky finger deep into her ear canal, she wiggles her tiniest digit back and forth, hoping the loud vibration within her eardrum will drown out the low voices, but nope; it wouldn't be until Yufei is outside, walking amidst the crush of executives within the Pudong financial district in Shanghai, that the low-frequency whispers inside her

head would be replaced with the sounds of the city: street venders hawking mostly counterfeit goods—DVDs, purses, Chairman Mao figurines, you name it—in loud, passionate Mandarin; personalized cell-phone ring tones, buzzing in an array of escalating electrical notes; bus engines, screeching to avoid an anxious pedestrian. At twenty-four, heading to her second job out of university, Yufei holds her satchel tightly against her waist, aware that street vagrants can sniff out Shanghai's youngest generation, especially young women, who have learned not to make eye contact, even as they hurry down crowded stairways, down to the Metro lines.

There, flooded within the electric fluorescence inside the terminal, Yufei waits for Line 2, quietly pulling from her satchel a paperback novel. Around her, this early in the morning, are mostly younger adults, the older generations choosing instead to ride the buses overhead, or to walk, skeptical of new technology, especially when the city seems to be moving forward at such an accelerated speed. Once inside Line 2, she sits on the corner of an unoccupied bench, a young gentleman taking the opposite end, not acknowledging her, although she raises her head to offer a half-smile. Yufei thinks about how quickly the uncommon can become common, how when she was a little girl, she never dreamt of riding in an underground train, how now, she rides one twice a day, even watches short programs on the LCD screens attached to the walls. Every so often, she'll sneak a peek at the other passengers, wondering what thoughts run through their heads, wondering if perhaps she recognizes them from the Communist Youth League, but she never says anything, too scared to intrude one's personal space; instead, she sits in her private silence, hoping one day someone will recognize her.

For the first time this morning—too busy chasing down errant voices earlier in the day—Yufei brushes her fingers through the knots in her hair, pulling loose the tangled bows. Then, out of nowhere, in the reflection of the Metro glass, she sees what must be her shadow, sitting directly beside her, although the figure's movements aren't an echo of hers; rather, the silhouette's head leans on Yufei's shoulder, wiping her long crooked nose against the woven fabric. Against her side, Yufei can almost feel the cold weight of someone else's frame, bearing gently on her among the fabric folds of her oversized jacket, but when Yufei turns to her side, all that is left is a single

strand of long black hair, slithered against the bench's shiny teal surface in a series of unconstrained curls. Surely it must be one of her own, Yufei thinks, nervously plucking the hair from the bench, its shape a giant question mark floating midair.

Eight A.M., the first floor of the stockbrokerage where Yufei works is already crowded with customers, wearing anxious expressions, uncertain of the status of their A-shares, some of whom have only just begun to invest in the future of China. One by one, they wait in line, each with a story about something they heard in the news, worried that the status of their stocks are in turmoil. They wear their moth-ball-scented best—embroidered silks, fine woolens, brushed cashmere—hoping to convince the brokers to work particularly hard on their individual portfolios. Looking at their wrinkled, worn faces, many of them remind Yufei of her ma, of the older generation, hesitantly clinging to their yuan, yet steadily believing in the stability of Chinese companies and the strength of capitalism. Yufei understands their hesitancy, for even though her own office is filled with brand-new furniture, the fresh coat of paint on the wall barely conceals the logo of a bankrupt government-run cement company. Lucky for Yufei, she works on one of the higher floors as a research analyst, and therefore doesn't have to complete transactions face-to-face, assuring the public that their money is safe in Chinese shares, although Yufei, too, believes it, having completed a business degree.

One of only a handful of young women at the stockbrokerage, Yufei wants to work that much harder, knowing her male colleagues whisper behind her back, doubting the ability of a woman as young and as beautiful as Yufei. "Sunshine," her boss likes to call her, before dumping a pile of stock graphs on her desk for her to analyze, but she thanks him in a cheery, high tone, unwilling to flinch at the sight of a paper mountain. The yellow, green, blue, splintered, fractured lines of the stochastic graphs read like an irregular heartbeat on a heart-rate monitor, all peaks then valleys. Sometimes Yufei believes that indeed, the life of her country rests within these figures, and like a doctor, she must diagnose the probability of a company's longevity, almost as a fortune teller would, reading the lines on one's palm.

Once the silence sets in, her office door closed to the chaos outside, the soft murmurs formed earlier in the morning infiltrate her consciousness like an unwieldy itch, severing her from mathematical evaluations, until finally she decides to surrender to the noise. At first, the pitch of the volume comes in and out of clarity, as if atomizing, unable to unite into a single, full, round word. Pressing her head against the surface of her desk, Yufei tries to isolate the noise, the chill of dead oak pinching her cheeks, the thump of her heart accelerating. She tries to convince herself that what she's experiencing is a headache, something that can be cured with ibuprofen, but the obscure noise scratches within her cranium like a bird's claw, unremitting. Come out and play—she thinks she can make out in a child's voice, high and enthusiastic. Rubbing the back of her palm against her brow, she draws out the distant call: "We...miss...you."

Hours later, she convinces herself that what she is experiencing may in fact be dangerous to her health—melanoma, schizophrenia, the early stages of Parkinson's disease. Or, on the optimistic side, she hopes that all she needs is rest, perhaps a glass of yam wine, along with a long hot bath, full of relaxing salts. Drumming her fingers against her desk in quick succession, opening her window to let in the honks and squeals of nearby automobiles, playing an audio file low on her computer stereo, Yufei tries to fill her office with noise, knowing she has only until noon before her boss will come in to check her work process. The voices abate, temporary as it may be, and when her boss comes around, she will once again prove to be his shining sun, a star in the workplace, as reliable as they come.

"There's always the possibility that all this is simply because your ma is coming for a visit," Ping, a colleague who works in first-floor transactions, says in comforting Mandarin, once the two of them meet for lunch at a nearby bakery. "At least you don't have to deal with the loons on the first floor—" Ping begins, before dipping her finger into the winter-melon paste inside her wife cake. By Ping's account, she finds it incredibly difficult to stop herself from smacking the customers whenever they come into the brokerage with stories of how their distant relatives from the rural country have warned them about a scarlet streak tainting the morning sky,

how the cicadas have suddenly gone silent, how the sediment inside the barrels of sorghum wine have risen to the top, how all this must mean that their investments will soon go south, therefore, they will need to completely reevaluate their entire portfolio. "This old man comes in today," Ping continues with eyes as wide as golf balls, "waving an emerald rooster feather at me, claiming his chicken has never clucked his entire life, but yesterday, all clucks, clucks, clucks, from sunrise to nightfall, so surely something bad is about to happen."

"Don't be so cruel," Yufei says, holding back laughter, as she tries to convince herself Ma wouldn't be guilty of such wild prognostications if she were to ever trust a stockbrokerage. "They don't know any better."

"What about when the same man comes in next week, unwilling to admit that I was right"—Ping regards Yufei with a convincing stare—"that he shouldn't trust his chicken for financial advice?"

Yufei spins her chopsticks in her lychee tea, twirling the leaves into a minor whirlpool all the way to the skin of the liquid, before she bites into her peach-kernel cake. Watching as the soiled leaves slowly sink back to the pit of the cup, she remembers how her grandma used to read their patterns, studying the symbols in the dregs, then telling her how her future was so bright she was blinded by its glare. According to Ping, such prophesies hold no truth.

"Are you hearing the voices right now?" Ping inquires, leaning in close as if she may hear the voices, too.

Yufei raises her chin, laughs, then shakes her head.

The concrete walls inside Yufei's studio apartment—a converted iron factory—resist nails, tape, glues, and putties, and although its prior life would imply expansive rooms and high ceilings, during the conversion, little space was allocated for each individual flat. Perhaps it is indeed stress from Ma's upcoming visit that has led her mind to wander, Yufei thinks, as she cleans a mound of dehydrated-watermelon-seed shells left on the parquet floor. Judging by the checks Yufei sends her every month, most certainly Ma will expect her to be living in far more lavish surroundings than this, although Yufei is perfectly content in her current living situation—it is

close to the brokerage, the rent is affordable, a fresh-produce marketplace is within walking distance.

Night after night, Yufei goes over the answers to what she assumes will be Ma's line of questioning—Are you in a relationship? Do you want to be in relationship? How can you not want to be in a relationship?—until the voices she has heard earlier in the week are drowned out by her own concerns. Of course, part of Yufei would like to admit she suffers from occasional loneliness, but being an only child, she has endured loneliness her entire life, and admitting the slightest bit of forlornness would only give Ma impetus to contact endless matchmakers in her rural province. When Ma eventually arrives, exhausted from hours on a train, she meekly takes a corner of the room, quietly nodding her head at the surroundings, as if proud of her single daughter. Compared to the last time Yufei saw her, at her commencement ceremony from university, Ma appears far more fragile, her skin thin and transparent like parchment paper, her frame wobbly like a knurly tree branch. Such sights concern Yufei, who already feels a pinch of guilt from leaving Ma behind to pursue her own life in the city, though she knows Ma will never ask her to return to the farmlands, just as she knows she will never offer to.

On the stove, pork porridge stews alongside a pot of salted sea vegetables; this is where Yufei pays special attention, careful not to overcook Ma's favorite dish. Although she had not thought about it when she spent the afternoon in the open-air marketplace, picking an assortment of purple laver, hair seaweed, red dulse, and sea beans, Yufei now realizes this will be the first time she has ever cooked for Ma. Slowly stirring the simmering ocean, Yufei almost loses herself in the dancing vegetables that purl in a series of concentric circles, as if to a song. Ma, of course, will complain of the sogginess of the sea beans, mentioning how Yufei's fancy degree has taught her nothing about the preparation of delicate vegetables, and Yufei will nod her head, surrendering the rest of the cooking duties for the duration of Ma's stay.

"However, the pork porridge has turned out perfectly," Ma says, slurping the rice gruel between her teeth. "Neither too thick, nor too watery."

"Thank you, ma," Yufei offers, blowing on her first spoonful.

Aside from a few comments here and there in regards to the meal, Ma has been otherwise reserved, staring head down into her pork porridge, uncharacteristic of her normal behavior. Something is wrong, Yufei thinks, though she is hesitant to press the matter, fearing that it will require something from her—her time, her energy, her sacrifice. Ma is usually quick to ask for a cushion for her sore feet, a back rub to alleviate a crook in her neck, a few extra yuan to purchase under-eye cream, so the grandness of her current dilemma must be extravagant, thinks Yufei, who playfully drowns her tofu cubes deep into her porridge bowl, trying her best to avoid eye contact.

"I am an old woman, Yufei—" Ma says in her lower register. "A lonely woman."

Yufei shakes her head and utters, "How old are you? Fifty-three? That is by no means an old woman."

"Your father's death has aged me," she says, running a finger along a wrinkle that extends from her ear to her nose. "But passing time is not what bothers me; it is the loneliness, the fear that my only company will be my shadow—a slanted black line always running away from me."

Yufei opens her mouth to speak, but is reluctant to say a word. All these years, Yufei has never wanted to admit to herself that she has taken comfort in the fact that in the rural provinces, widows who remarry are frowned upon, almost shunned; therefore, Yufei has never had to worry about the chore of Ma wanting to find a second husband. In the rural provinces, a dedicated widow who spends the rest of her life committed to the memory of her husband is respected, an example of a good woman, a good wife. Suddenly worried Ma will ask to her move home, Yufei asks, "What about the checks I send you every month? Surely you can hire a matchmaker. Find a suitable husband."

Raising the porridge bowl to her mouth, Ma takes one last sip, wiping her lips clean with the back of her palm. "Don't think I haven't tried," she says, blushing. "But what you don't understand is that in our town I am cursed. A husband who dies of a heart attack at such a young age, a daughter who leaves home never to return—these things have left me a leper, someone no one has a problem pitying,

yet no one has a problem avoiding, either."

Hard as she may try to suppress them, Yufei feels the pinch of tears collecting within her eye crevices, but she will not let them fall. Throughout her effort to succeed in primary school, university, and the workplace, she has never allowed herself to consider the rural life she left behind; or, maybe she has, but only in a superficial manner—a story she tells herself to make herself work that much harder.

"But"—Ma finally says, after three tea sips—"whenever I talk to the matchmaker, she asks about my young, beautiful, successful daughter, until one day, she came up with a wonderful idea." For a moment, the words linger midair like puffs of smoke from the coal factory in Yufei's hometown. Awkwardly mumbling the rest of her thoughts, Ma prompts Yufei to ask her to repeat them, louder. "The matchmaker said," Ma continues, "that perhaps we can be matched in a pair—you taking the young son; me, the widowed father."

Hearing this, Yufei wants to laugh, to blow the suggestion right out of the room with a succession of full, round, loud guffaws, but the impulse is fleeting, for across from her is Ma, nervously biting her lower lip, awaiting a response. As Yufei rises from her chair to kneel by Ma's side, she realizes it is times like this she wishes she had siblings—someone else to help keep the family afloat. She pours the rest of the tea kettle into Ma's cup, the skin of the liquid on the brink of overflowing.

"Don't think I haven't thought this through," Ma says, turning sideways to directly face her daughter. "We have the most handsome single gentleman in our town. A university graduate, too, who teaches at the Educator's School. His father is a widow, with a high pension—"

Ma knows what her response will be, Yufei can tell, for the conviction in her tone wears thin as she continues to describe the line of women hoping to marry the young gentleman, the elation the matchmaker experiences when she believes she has found the perfect match, the number of caretakers the widowed father keeps on the land. From Ma's cup, a cord of tea dribbles down the porcelain like a golden vein, staining the wooden table. Yufei presses her lips against the back of Ma's hand, shaking her head back and forth, as if to say, I cannot do this, no matter how bad you may want me to, I cannot.

"Move in with me—" Yufei begins, a lump in her throat. Part of her remembers her youth in the agrarian lands, pulling twice her weight in persimmons after her father's death, remnants of the fruit flesh underneath her fingernails, in her hair, on her breath. Part of her thinks she has already given Ma enough, but is there a limit to how much a Chinese daughter can give to her family? she considers, before opening her mouth again. "My bed is far larger than the one we shared back home, and the furnace is hotter, too," she forces herself to continue, though really, she enjoys spreading her limbs towards her bed's four corners.

"Don't make a fool of me!" Ma complains, shooing Yufei off her knees. "Trust me, I have no need for the chaos that bleeds from every Shanghai corner, nor will I be any use to you, or anyone in this city, for that matter." Ma raises her chin, defiant. "Besides, due to the Hukou system, I will need to get a temporary residence card from the security office back home before I can even think of staying here. It amuses me that you city dwellers look down on the rural migrants who feed and clothe you."

Tempted to call her bluff, Yufei considers dropping the topic entirely, perhaps offering an increase to the monthly checks she sends her, but the mere fact Ma has looked into how one attains a temporary residence card shows Yufei that she has indeed considered a move. On the stove, the last of the sea vegetables fragment in the warm water. The autumn chill lingers midair. Picturing Ma, back home, sitting in her cold one-bedroom flat, an entire town pretending as though a dark brume follows her every step, Yufei knows she will convince her to stay, even if it means lying—telling her that she, too, needs company.

Early into the small hours, Yufei thinks she awakens from a suffocating dream, her body drenched with sweat, her throat dry like straw, as if she has been running, screaming. Ma sleeps comfortably beside her, undisturbed by the sudden vibration of Yufei's clattered joints.

A lingering blue fog, so thick Yufei has trouble seeing her hands before her, fills the room like smoke. Had she left the stove on? Is the sound she hears a fire's empty crackle? Faster than a reckless projector, her mind zips through a reel of images—a

plastic unicorn barrette used to clasp the end of a braid, the blur of a girl's face during an underwater breathing contest, a muddy handprint on the skirt of a cheongsam—but to who do these memories belong? Disorientated and dizzy, she stretches out her hands in order to touch her way towards the kitchen, but suddenly, her fingers catch snippets of hair, long and black, as if there are other people in the room. Closing her eyes, she pretends that her hands are catching cobweb traces, not hair, that she and Ma are in the room, alone; but a susurrus sound, like a submarine's muffled audio transmission, fractured and skipping, whispers into her ear, unmistakable.

"Who's there?" she demands, recognizing a girl's voice in the din.

All of a sudden, blindly reaching for anything to grasp, she finds her palm pressed against a hollow mass that feels like bruised skin, tender and mushy. As she moves her hands along the silhouette, its temperature increases, its frame taking on heavier volume, until she almost feels life underneath its skin. A familiar life. Steadily, she hears the amplified scratch of a first breath of air, then an inner rumbling, pulsing through the shape; finally, the warmth of its breath kisses the surface of Yufei's cheek.

A strange tremble overtakes Yufei's body, growing stronger with each passing second, until suddenly, she feels the whip of her cheeks slapping against her pillow, side to side, her eyes now open, Ma's hands firmly shaking her awake.

Ma asks, "What's wrong with you?" Suddenly, the first signs of sunlight bleed through the window blinds in translucent yellow rays, and Yufei struggles to find her footing, leaning her forehead against the cool concrete wall.

"This can't be happening," she says, pounding her head against the rough exterior, "not again." Her fingers tremble, unable to hold the weight of a water glass, so she drinks straight from the faucet. "Just a nightmare, that's all," Yufei says in response to Ma's hanging mouth. But was it, really? she wonders, recalling how she recognized the girl's voice, her touch, her silhouette. Pacing the length of her studio, back and forth, she tries to recall the events in her dream, but finds the task arduous, like trying to catch dragonflies in a jar.

Ma hurries to her suitcase, retrieves a plastic bag of parched roots, an herb no doubt, and adds it to the kettle of water she puts on the stove.

"That won't help," Yufei utters, rubbing her temples with her knuckles. Then, without warning, her nose starts to bleed, pellets of blood falling onto the parquet floor like ruby arils, splashing upon impact. "Don't worry, this has been happening a lot lately," Yufei lies, trying to calmly lean her head back to stop the bleeding.

"No, no," Ma says, taking hold of Yufei's neck. "Lean forward, let it bleed out."

Without prompting, Ma pinches her daughter's nose with a ball of tissue until it's saturated, a paper heart, dripping into the sink. Against the white granite, the blood runs in a single long whorl, expanding like a bud into a blossom. Yufei realizes that the girl in her dreams, in the windows, in her head, must be dead, but how? she asks herself. Raising her head, the last of the blood trickling down her chin, she tries to steady her breath, but cannot stop herself from choking for air intermittently. "Did any of the aunties die as a girl?" she finally asks, coughing.

Ma sneers. "What are you talking about?"

"Conditions were incredibly difficult back then, almost impossible," Yufei responds in a gentle tone, trying to ease Ma into openness, although she suspects the girl in her head did not die from harsh conditions. "Grandma had so many children, surely it must had been problematic to feed all of those mouths."

"Listen," Ma begins, unblinking. "Your grandmother was considered a hero in her time, a mother hero who bore eleven healthy children under Chairman Mao, for the population of her communist country. Not a single one of her children had a cold, let alone died from 'difficult' conditions. Understand?"

Throughout her youth, Yufei heard stories about how her grandma would sit in the center of the town square like a round, healthy Buddha, with supposedly every townsperson as a servant, feeding her dried apricots and fresh watermelon wedges, all to keep her golden womb strong, healthy, productive. All of the aunties and uncles preach the same song—a portrait of woman with no faults, no illnesses, no dead children, but then who is the girl in her dreams? Who does she belong to? "Ma," Yufei whispers, raising the blinds to let the safety of sunlight in. "Did I have any sisters?"

"What do you mean to ask?" Ma snaps, regarding her with a pair of squinted

eyes. "Do you mean to ask if I had other baby girls, and killed them hoping for a baby boy? *Sheesh*, your whole generation thinks your parents killed their baby girls left and right, as if killing your own blood would be as easy as killing a chicken."

"That's not what I meant," Yufei tries to say convincingly, although she addresses her exact suspicion, even if she does not offer a precise answer.

"The answer is no," Ma says, a mind reader. "You never had any siblings, never were allowed to." She tapped Yufei's forehead with her index finger. "You, like everyone in your generation, were born under the one-child policy. Why do you ask questions you already know the answers to?"

Of course, Yufei remembers her parents having conversations, late into the night, about whether or not they should have signed the one-child certificate, especially since both of them were born into such large families. Perhaps they could have hid, had children in secret, and moved from town to town, claiming their offspring were of sickly friends, or found abandoned on the roadside. The thought of a single child, carrying the burden of such a large ancestry seemed unfathomable, her father argued, but Yufei's parents agreed to the contract because it meant that their daughter would receive a better education than she would have otherwise, that the family, too, would receive economical incentives from the government. And yes, in many ways, the one-child policy worked because Yufei was able to receive the best education that anyone from her rural town had ever before, and she also had the unwavering support of her family, something that wouldn't have happened if she were one of ten siblings like Ma, especially if any of those siblings were boys. A brotherless daughter, something so rare, one of her female instructors had told Yufei when she was just a little girl. "Lucky you," the instructor smiled. "Never having to compete for attention with brothers, never having to sacrifice. You'll be among the first of a generation of many, creating a path to be walked on for years to come."

Yufei recalls how she blushed, uncertain of the significance of her instructor's words.

"Chairman Mao knew that the history of a Chinese family couldn't be hoisted on the shoulders of one child," Ma continues. "But what does the new government

do? Less than three years after his death, in 1979, they introduce the one-child policy, so by the time my siblings reach old age, there will be no one left to take care of us."

"Don't be so critical, Ma. It will only be for one generation. If I marry a man born of the one-child policy, we can choose to have two children, according to new policy."

"But will you ever marry?" Ma asks, shaking her head. "Your generation knows only how to look out for one's self. None of you understand how to rely on one another for support because all of you have grown up as single children. Am I right?"

"That's not true—" Yufei insists, unable to come up with a convincing argument.

"Or, perhaps, you can invent a husband, like you used to do as a girl," Ma laughs, throwing her hands into the air.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you remember?" Ma asks, pouring herself a cup of tea. "Every day, you used to walk around town, cupping your hand to the air, as if you were holding the hand of a sibling. I assumed it was because you were jealous of the kids a few years older than you, born before the one-child policy, who had numerous sisters and brothers, whereas you were always alone. 'Can you see them, Ma?" you would ask me every day, and I'd always say 'no,' until one day you drew me pictures of them." Ma shook her head, surprised Yufei cannot remember. "One of them had a long crooked nose that reached down to her chin, and black stick-straight hair that fell to her waist. I said, 'Why did you invent such an ugly sister?' and you started crying, refusing to speak to me for a week."

Yufei sits silently, a tiny fit of electricity running through her, as the vague details of Ma's story kindle forgotten memories—those instances when spectators pointed at her while she braided the hair of, read aloud to, and swam in the reservoir with imaginary sisters, no one else was privileged to see.

Ma says, "we called you the Little Girl with Secret Sisters, based upon the legend of the Caretaker's Secret Family."

Passed down from Yufei's great-grandmother, Ma explained, was the saga of a middle-aged spinster, who, for as long as she could remember, dreamt of having a family large enough to maintain a paddy farm without the help of a single laborer, yet, year by year, she watched as each of her siblings married and filled their homes with hungry mouths, her hair growing grayer, her only company the burping coals in her furnace. Born dryer than desert sands, she had been the caretaker for most of the village population, passed from house to house, generation to generation, instructed to never get too close to the children she watched, for as soon as they could care for themselves, off to another family she was! One day, though, overwhelmed by the sadness that came from being let go by another family whose children had outgrown her, the caretaker went to the marketplace to purchase a variety of scarves, mittens, and socks. "I suppose you're visiting your nieces and nephews," the merchant said, shaking his head in sympathy. "No," she replied, "my children will need warm clothing for the upcoming winter. They'll be coming soon. I can hear them in my head."

Soon enough, the entire town had learned that the caretaker had finally lost control of her senses, yet they pitied her requests for extra portions of rice porridge, bamboo shoots, and salty duck eggs, even going as far to nod their heads when she said her children's tummies were especially hungry from playing outside all day in the spring heat. "But why don't you ever bring your children to the market?" a merchant finally asked her one day, to which she replied: "They'd be far too tempted by the array of sweets, kind merchant." The more the caretaker catered to the needs of her invented children—purchasing them bicycles, adding an additional room to her flat—the more the town questioned her, until one day, she brought her secret children with her to the marketplace, their rosy cheeks, chubby fingers, hungry mouths, just as real as the summer sun that warmed the entire village from above.

Her arms crossed, her face blank, Yufei responds, "You don't actually believe that, do you? Most certainly, one cannot make children by simply purchasing food and clothes for them."

"Yufei," Ma says, "you've missed the whole point. It was the caretaker's intense desire that allowed her secret children to come to life."

Opposite from her, Yufei leans against the foot of her bed, reminding herself that she has an appointment with a doctor, an M.D. who will diagnose her symptoms based on science, not folktales. She taps her pen against her portable calendar, circling her appointment in red ink to punctuate her thought. "It's just a myth, Ma," she says, a sad laugh escaping her mouth. "Nothing more, nothing less."

Ma inhales a long breath through her nose, the oxygen fluttering from her nostrils to her belly, before purring from her mouth in quiet hum. "All I know," she begins, "is that this great country is built on myth, and that one day you and I, too, will be a part of it."

Nearly ten o'clock at night, Yufei decides to take a walk in the Bund along Huangpu river, the surrounding architecture, with their slopes, orbs, and lines, reminding her of logic, practicality. Above her, the Shanghai skyline appears as a series of burning candles, their wax—luminous yellows, oranges, reds, blues—melting into the river in parallel lengths. When Yufei was a little girl, on holiday to the big city, she stood on this exact same spot, asking Ma's permission to climb over the railing, so she could touch the skyscrapers' colorful reflection on the river surface, to see for herself whether or not the reflection's color would stick to her fingers like putty. "Instead of ruining the mystery, why not embrace it?" her ma whispered into her ear. Back then, the older kids had the same idea as me, swarms of brothers and sisters tugging at their parents' shirt sleeves, their loud, brassy voices filling the air with requests to be allowed to lean over the railing, feel the reflection's texture, but Ma held Yufei back for as long as she could.

Now the crowd of children's utterances are long gone, replaced with the quiet whispers of couples walking hand in hand, their echoes so weak, the sound of running water swallows them. At the railing, a married couple pushes along a single baby carriage, the shadows of toddler fingers reaching past the cushioned seat, but as far as sounds are concerned, only the squeal of plastic wheels persists.

Overhead, clouds heavy with rain linger, sending tiny divers down to disrupt the cold asphalt and river skin, arcs of water bouncing in all directions, catching the city fluorescence like opal fireworks, low to the ground. Nearby, a jacketed

gentleman pulls open the fabric flap of his coat, then draws his girlfriend near, covering her from the rain, as if carrying her under his wing; the married couple launches a nylon umbrella to protect their baby from an autumn cold, yet Yufei takes a seat on a wooden bench, open to the falling rain. Soon enough, all of the pedestrians will wisely find shelter underneath a canopy or within one of the shops, but Yufei will sit still, the red lights from a high-rise antennae blinking on and off in the distance, each of its blips separated by invisible seconds. One, two, three, Yufei will count aloud, just to hear a voice, even if it's her own.

When she closes her eyes, she finds herself in a strange state of mind, uncertain if she almost misses the company the frequent murmurs in her head provided. No, don't be silly, she laughs. Opening her eyes, she sees in the distance a layer of rain, appearing to fall around a slim silhouette, revealing the cast of a body. Lurching forward, Yufei's wet clothes cling to her legs, hips, waist, chest, hugging her body tightly, like a series of arms, drawing her close. This feeling—a warm embrace in an autumn downpour—reminds Yufei of her youth, of the images that have haunted her the past couple of weeks, of a time when she could surrender to the slightest fancy. She isn't that child any longer, and hasn't been for many years. Raising her hand, she is tempted to reach out and try to touch the dry form in the distance; however, she decides to linger in the myth a bit longer, for in her ear, she can hear Ma's words from years ago, "Instead of ruining the mystery, why not embrace it?"

Requiem for the Living

Kellie Wells

The day my ears filled with the singing of the Dead (suddenly, as though I'd leapt into a sonic lake) is a day I'll never forget so long as my heart shall pump and perhaps, I am now led to hope, beyond! Beyond the ebbing of its miserable beats.

It was a joyful noise that could only issue from a register audible to ear-to-the-ground angels (or mortals with, um, er, high-altitude aspirations). A tintinnabular keening like the exhalation of a balloon whose throat is tautly stretched, pulled tight (tight as the limbs of the soon-to-be tortured) by the pudgy fingers of a child in search of the reassurance of a celestial shriek, the memory of which yet infects her fledgling flesh. (A child's tenure in the material world is provisional; still able to hazily recollect a beforelife, she is not always resolved to remain.)

You will say this is occult and unlikely. And I'll not disagree. Uncomfortable, squirming beneath the woolen itch of the unimaginable, you'll resort to jocularity, quip that I must have neglected my meds that day, yukkity-yuk, having lost all reason. I'll smile quietly, indulge your doubt, your unease at the thought of a flesh-moldered choir. But the fact will remain.

Facts, however revenant, always remain.

I was on a pay phone, a call to my sister.

All Souls' Day (I kid you not!). Though the air outside had yet to chill to freezing, the weather was spring warmth in the booth and my breath fogged the glass as I waited unwittingly for my fated path to fork.

I was calling to ask if there might be a place in her rock garden for some

ground cover, ophiopogon planiscapus 'nigrescens' to be precise, a sprouting of licorice whip leaves, flat and black like boot straps, bringing to mind our father—a lover of licorice, a wearer of boots—deceased only a few months, a plant able to thrive in craggy adversity, sending stolons creeping stealthily underground, and masquerading (a chromatic deception) among the lily family. I'd passed an alpine nursery and though the time for the racemes of purple-petaled flowers and the blue-black fruit that further distinguish Black Mondo Grass had passed, I could not resist the beckoning blackness. Bot noir perhaps to the more tastefully discriminating, those readily seduced by the coquetry of the frail tea rose or the brazen flash of the camellia, that trollop.

The other end warbled its staticy ring and I longed to hear the rehearsed words that would beseech me (my sister's voice has always been cadenced with a pleading lilt) to identify myself and leave behind a spoken dispatch. Unlike most, who are nettled by the thought of a johnny-on-the-spot performance, I prefer the further mediation of a recorded voice to the shifty copper cable transport of the Voice Speaking at the Moment I Encounter It. I am free to compose an impromptu megillah, which would otherwise most probably be abbreviated by the self-consciousness of holding a live ear captive.

But when the machine picked up, a dead stillness rang where once my sister's chirping had been, and then I discerned a nearly inaudible ululation, a breathy wail that caused a sharp pain to crawl along the back of my neck, as though the skin there were being unzipped and something inside, the spirit? was wresting itself free of the incarcerating flesh. I instantly understood I was in the presence of something hypostatic (if vaguely feral).

With great concentration, I listened (and I confess the following at the risk of seeming like an over-ardent votary, a groupie desperate to hear a beyond-the-grave transmission in the backward revolutions of a beloved album). Slowly and with great effort, my ears strained and began to sort words from amidst the airy howl: *shoes* (or was it *choose*?), *yesterday*, *room* (*doom*? *womb*?), and then those yowling voices staggering hither and yon stumbled into harmonic accord and broke into bona fide song; they trilled: *Ask to be buried in a warm coat, sensible shoes*. There was a sound like

the blowing of bubbles under water: *laughter*. They sang: *We're sorry to say we are the last. Even infinity has its limits, its limits. Eternity beats at a faster clip than you might imagine.* My ear flamed and began to ache; I felt it draining, warm fluid washing over it, as if it had been lanced, less ear than carbuncle. The elder dead, *sotto voce*, sang: *Seems like only yesterday*. I thought I detected the bass rumble of our father's voice anchoring the chorus, and the blood in my heart stilled, the sound a thrombus obstructing the flow of life. Then they bleated like lemurs, and the phone slipped from my hand.

A tiny woman, dun skin wizened as a forgotten potato, chartreuse cloche cocked jauntily on her small bean, jewelled spectacles, knocked on the glass.

The swinging receiver whistled. Rising out of the eerie clatter, a tinny, stentorian voice boomed a garbled aria. My knees grew gooseflesh. When I was a child, my father told me if he ever left this world—and he wasn't convinced that he would—not to worry, he'd be back to fetch my sister and me.

I found that again I held the phone in my hand. The woman outside the booth was now backing down the sidewalk, a look of fuddled grief twisting her face, which shone a luminous green in the evening light, her hands clutching her thin coat, wrapping it snugly about her, and the din of the dearly departed thinned to the sound of water bubbling over rocks in a streambed.

A voice, a startling twin to my sister's, in a timbre of lament, whispered there was space for a few more, *only a little room left.* Then she murmured the shibboleth, the password for the transmigration to end them all—she said it, the word of ingress, the knock-knock that would open the gate, the ponderous Rosetta stone we could tie to our ankles as we sank into the murk of eternal epiphany. It hissed and fizzled into silence, like a firework you suspect is a dud but approach tentatively, fearing it might flare and detonate the minute you jostle it with your toe, test it for dormant life.

Again the phone dangled umbilically, connection not yet severed. I cupped my ear, flooded with the sagacity of the dead. In the end was the word.

I tell it to you.

Only a little room.

Listen.

The Great Alligator Farm Standoff

William J. Cobb

The best liars are those who sometimes tell the truth. Unreliability doesn't make them lesser human beings, just less trustworthy. The man who taught me how to play chess was an outrageous liar and a gas-pump pirate, a compulsive-blinker I knew only as Pete. He'd always describe the most fantastic, most improbable events, then punctuate them with the fishy qualifier, "True story." He told how he'd once saved former Texas Governor John Connally from rattlesnake bite by cutting an x into his arm and sucking out the poison, how he'd taught J. Edgar Hoover to play ping-pong, how he'd seen an alien spacecraft illuminated by lightning strikes in Marfa, Texas, in the middle of a June thunderstorm. I've always been something of a skeptic myself, and believed little of what he said. But the night of the Great Alligator Farm Standoff? I was there.

It was after midnight in my family's honkytonk, the local hot spot of Fulton, a small town on the Texas coast. Having no two a.m. liquor license, we had to lock the doors, but still Pete and I leaned over the chessboard. The room glowed from Falstaff and Schlitz signs on the wall, one of them an elaborate shimmering waterfall scene, as if drinking beer had something mystical to do with rivers and not the lonesome country music tunes playing on the jukebox. The traffic along Fulton Beach Road was dead, save for wobbly red taillights fading as the occasional midnight cowboy weaved homeward from The Canoe Club.

Pete scrutinized the board with his thin-lipped smile, prying open his eyelids with two fingers when they clamped shut and refused to open. I had him in check.

When my parents went home they left me the keys to unlock the front door to let Pete out, and told me, "Now don't keep Pete up too late. Some people have to work in the morning." That was a dig at my college kid status, home for vacation.

Pete paid no attention to that. He traded his bishop for my rook and said, "People don't understand the Alligator Man. If the police would put their guns down and look into their hearts, this whole brouhaha would be over, no blood spilt."

This much I knew: The owner of The Alligator Farm had been accused of growing a field of marijuana plants on his proverbial back forty. The farm was south of town, a sadsack roadside attraction: its lurid, rusty sign featured a badly drawn 'gator. When the police came for him, he'd bolted the door, grabbed a rifle, ammo, and fled out the back, rowed across the alligator-infested pond to a small island where he gave feeding shows, then challenged the coppers to come and get him. Like Jesse James or Pretty Boy Floyd, he'd supposedly vowed they'd never take him alive.

As we discussed it over the chessboard, Pete insisted he should volunteer as hostage negotiator. When I pointed out there was no hostage, unless you wanted to consider the Alligator Man holding himself, or the alligators in the pond surrounding him, hostage, Pete said, "Okay, police standoff negotiator. Whatever. That's not the point. The point is I know the man. He'll listen to me, I tell you. What if we drive out there? Are you game?"

I said something to the extent of Well yes but....It was after one by then. As we hemmed and hawed, our enthusiasm waned. There was no sense in making a fool of ourselves with the few policemen who must be drinking coffee and waiting for the Alligator Man to give himself up. We said good night and went our separate ways to sleep.

Now it's important to realize the oddball nature of Pete. He pumped gas at a station just north of Rockport, near Fulton, on Highway 35. They said his eyes were ruined by a splash of gasoline, that he'd had an accident and dropped the pump, the spray poisoning his eyes. He always blinked afterward, repeatedly, constantly, enough to be labeled a town oddity. He never talked about it himself, never so much as referred to it, although sometimes he would sigh, groan even, when he had to reach up and manually pry and hold his eyes open to see the menu.

He also taught me how to play chess. I'd known moves before: Pete taught me to win. We held honkytonk chess tournaments and he could best most everyone. He once beat me twenty-one games in a row. I studied his moves and techniques, his openings and gambits, his rudimentary Queens Indian Defense.

Before long I gave him a run for his money. Sometimes I won. Sometimes I wondered if he let me win. On occasion I could tell he didn't, that I'd actually managed to outsmart him. I was never better than him, though. At best I'd make him pause a long time, his eyes blinking shut in frustration, before he would reach over with his bony, sunburnt hands to move a knight or pawn.

He was one to understand a man in a pickle. He knew what it was like to be a freak.

The next day the standoff continued. Pete found me in the early evening at my parents' place, after he got off work at the service station. He told me he didn't think he had a chance, but he was headed for the alligator farm, and was determined to try to talk some sense into the law enforcement officials. I agreed to tag along, get a behind-the-scenes look at the intricate workings of defiance plus foolishness.

In downtown Fulton, which was all of a few blocks square, Pete's car was famous. It was considered the rustiest, filthiest, most junk-filled car in a town whose parking lots held more than its fair share of rusting junkmobiles. It smelled like bad gumbo. A creature that appeared to be half mouse and half crawdad scuttled out of a paper Dairy Queen sack in the backseat, then disappeared beneath a lampshade decorated with a cowboy and lariat design. The tail pipe spewed a blue cloud of exhaust as we tooled down a back road toward the alligator farm. The cloud behind us hung in the air like mosquito control fog. During the ride I kept my feet suspended off the floor, in case that crawmouse tried to crawl up my leg, and the windows rolled down, so I could breathe.

At the turnoff to the alligator farm, a deputy sheriff's car blocked the driveway, wedged sideways just beyond the billboard, the farm's advertisement, with its smiling alligator urging the public to come visit, Feedings Daily. The Barney Fife

turned us away. Pete blinked and insisted that he knew the Alligator Man, that he could talk him out of this, but the cop wasn't having it.

"This is a law enforcement matter," he said. "And unless you're the Donut Fairy with free samples for all, I'd back off and go home."

Pete left without a word, but a half mile down the road he took a left off Highway 35, and said he had an idea. He knew a back way in to the alligator farm, and he figured if he couldn't actually speak to the man one on one, maybe he could get close enough to yell something across the pond.

"Won't the police see us?" I asked.

"They can go to hell," said Pete. "You stay back, though, to play it safe. I'll give you my keys, so if I'm arrested, you can drive home. What's the worst that can happen?"

"You could get shot?"

That made him pause.

"Not likely," he said. "I can always raise my hands and plead stupid."

Pete parked the car on the back road, where he thought we'd hit the alligator farm if he simply headed south. It was dusk by then, fog hovering in the hollows of the marshes. We stumbled through a thicket of twisted live oak and palmetto, following a path in the knee-high swamp grass trampled by cattle, chupacabras, or the Alligator Man himself. At one point we came upon a turkey vulture perched in the top black branches of a dead oak tree, stretching out its dusky wings as if it were being crucified.

I kept bumbling into cobwebs, frantically pawing at them, afraid of those huge black and yellow spiders that spin webs big enough to catch warblers. It was impossible to walk a straight line south, picking and weaving a way through the tangled woods and swamp. Before long I had no idea where we were.

Pete insisted we weren't lost, but he was blinking so much I doubted him as a reliable narrator. Night fell with a soft rattlesnake hiss. In the gassy moonlight, all the world around us appeared in silhouette. At the edge of a black pond, in the beam of our flashlight, a small log became animate, morphing into a water moccasin, slithering into the dark water.

We went on, stumbling frantically through the thicket of spiderwebs and mosquitoes. Eventually, when I was close to panicking, scratching and prickly, we came into a clearing in the oaks.

In the center of it knelt a black-haired woman before what appeared to be an altar, a reliqueria or makeshift retablo. She faced a semicircular arrangement of candles in wine bottles and aluminum pie pans, decorated with lilies, saint figures, and newspaper articles. She paid no attention to us, lost in prayer. I was dumbfounded, Pete nonplussed.

"His wife," he whispered. "I thought she'd be here."

In this aura of suffering, the candles illuminated one side of her face with their golden flames, and the blue hue of moonlight gave the other side a mystical glow. Pete assured me that beyond the field where the woman knelt was the island on which the Alligator Man was engaged in his standoff with the deputy sheriffs of Aransas County. The flashlight beam faded to yellow, casting dim water fracture reflections on the cattails and salt grass. I couldn't see any island, but I took his word for it.

Pete gave me his car keys. He told me to hang back in case of trouble. I wasn't particularly keen on this plan. He had the flashlight, and I realized I had no chance in hell of finding my way back through the swamp. If push came to shove, I'd have probably been nothing more than a warm target for mosquitoes, spiders, and water moccasins, with turkey vultures picking my bones.

Pete squatted beside the woman and, for a few minutes, clasped his hands in prayer. They spoke in Spanish, low voices full of sadness and remorse. The night air rippled with a chorus of croaking frogs. The candles flickered. After a while, he got up and hugged her. I watched as he said his last words of encouragement, nodding, and walked my way, leaving the woman to her vigil.

He stalked moodily through the salt grass and palmetto on the walk back, which seemed only slightly less maddening. By the time we reached his messy car, I was itching like crazy and glad to climb in with the crawmice. He drove slowly, blinking furiously, in a serious funk. At times his eyes closed so fiercely I wondered if he'd get them back open to see to drive. I even wondered if I shouldn't offer to take the

wheel. I didn't want to hurt Pete's feelings. He may have been disadvantaged, but he wasn't a wreck.

Before he dropped me off he reminisced about the Alligator Man. Years before they'd been wadefishing in Copano Bay and a stingray skewered Pete, its barb breaking off in his calf muscle. The Alligator Man—now approaching the status of America's Most Wanted and an all-round menace to society—had driven Pete to a hospital. "He maybe saved my leg," said Pete. "The man's a crusty saint." At one of the few stoplights in Rockport, Pete planted his foot on the dashboard and yanked back his pants leg. And there, a divot in his scaly skin, was the bullethole-like stingray barb scar.

The memories deepened his gloom. I'd never seen Pete that depressed. "What's the point of anything?" he asked. "A man tries to make a living, a woman tries to love and take care of him? And what happens? The law throws a monkey wrench in the works."

When he dropped me off at home, I asked where he was going. He said he figured he'd check out the doings at my parents' honkytonk, maybe have a drink or twenty.

I'd like to report it all ended in peace, love, and understanding. That the Alligator Man was pardoned, reunited with his wife, returned to tend his ponds full of prehistoric behemoths. But that's not the way the world works. There's no sign sporting a friendly reptile left on Highway 35 between Rockport and Aransas Pass. Their time has passed. I remember now The Alligator Man turned himself in soon after our escapade. The standoff ended in embarrassment, as those things often do. He became just another perp on the TV news, in handcuffs, a deputy pushing down his head as he enters a squad car.

The rest is hazier. It seems we went back to our places: I returned to college, Pete pumped gas at the station. Over time, I lost track of him completely. I regret that. He was a good-hearted man who couldn't stop blinking, but who could feel for a man trapped on an island of mistakes, surrounded by alligators and police. True story.

An Interview with Jim Shepard

Sarah Aswell & Ben Fowlkes

Jim Shepard is the author of five novels, including Project X *and* Nosferatu, *as well as the highly acclaimed short story collection,* Love and Hydrogen. *He teaches at Williams College in Massachusetts and was this year's Engelhard Writer-In-Residence at The University of Montana. Recently, he sat down to talk with CutBank editor Sarah Aswell and prose board member Ben Fowlkes over whiskey at Missoula's Union Club.*

Ben Fowlkes: How do you respond to criticism that you lack a signature style?

Jim Shepard: People have been pissed off about that for a while. I get these reviews where people say 'Shepard always seems to be writing something different,' and I'm like, 'sorry.' But there also has been a way in which booksellers have told me that because they can't turn me into a brand. They have a lot of trouble selling me to the casual reader who asks 'What should I read?' And they say, 'Have you tried Jim Shepard?' And when people ask them, 'What does he write?' they say "Well, he writes a lot of different stuff,' and because of that hemming and hawing they just say, 'Who else have you got?' They can't just tell people I write a lot about the South and antebellum family drama, and that is one of the comforts of genre.

For a certain reader, there is a comfort in it, like when you read Cormac McCarthy and you know what's coming; that's a real pleasure. For some reason, I don't give my reader that pleasure. Part of it is continually wanting to interest myself, and part of it is wanting to continually enlarge that area of experience from

which I write. One of the ways I do that is by reading a lot and talking to experts in various fields.

Sarah Aswell: Talking to experts in various fields? Are you looking through the phone book?

Jim Shepard: That's one of the good things about being in an academic setting. Williams is not huge but it's pretty prestigious, so I can ask someone who I should talk to about the Soviet space program and they can tell me. As far as research goes, I've managed to work out a life where I can read whatever I want. I'm enough of a writer at this point that whenever I pick up a book, I have that in the back of my mind, thinking, I wonder if this could turn into something. I don't think, 'Now I'm going to write about the Soviet space program.' I'll often read stuff that engenders nothing, and some of my students ask, 'Don't you feel like you've wasted all that time?' But I'm enough of a nerd that I feel like, 'Hey, I got to read for three weeks about Vikings.'

SA: So you read a lot of nonfiction?

Jim Shepard: I read a ton of nonfiction. In fact, like a lot of fiction writers I know, I have to work to keep up with contemporary fiction because I read a lot of nonfiction. I read the fiction by my friends, and then I read the classical stuff that I never read but should have. So between all those things and having a life, it's sometimes difficult to save enough time to read new, young fiction writers.

SA: Have you found any new fiction writers that have caught your eye?

Jim Shepard: I don't know how new they are, but people like Ken Kalfus and others who are writing stories that range all over the map.

BF: What's the last book you read that really had an impact on you?

Jim Shepard: *Gilead*, probably—Marilynne Robinson book. She's only written two novels, *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*, which is a first person narrative of a 72-year-old Episcopalian minister who's realizing he doesn't have much time to live. He's writing the story of his life to his young son and observing his son as he's doing this. It's theatrically unambitious in terms of plot, and you're thinking that she can't pull this off because the investment of drama is entirely in voice. I think a lot of the voices that we're taken with are obsessive in some ways.

SA: What about nonfiction?

Jim Shepard: I'm reading a big history of the San Francisco earthquake. I just read an autobiography of Levon Helm, the drummer from The Band. I have this weird stack of things that I pick around in. The librarian at Williams about a year ago asked me, 'What do you do?' I think at the time I had a book about scorpions or something that I was checking out and she was probably thinking, 'Who is this person?'

There are some subjects that I can't imagine being interested enough in to write about, like math, which I don't understand well enough to be into. Sometimes it's really a matter of a dawning emotional resonance. It's not a matter of whether I think it's interesting enough. I think that's a mistake that's easy to make, to think you're looking for a good story, and there are a million good stories, but what makes some stand out is that emotional resonance. Once I came across this stuff about Charles Lindbergh and the Spirit of St. Louis, and I was reading about how he was preparing for the thirty-hour flight but had insomnia the three days before the flight. He realized that this was no good because in an airplane with no windshield for thirty hours he might fall asleep during the flight and that would be it. So he conceived of a plan of talking to himself out loud for thirty hours. I read this and thought, What could he have said to himself for thirty hours? So for about six months I read about Charles Lindbergh, thought it was all interesting and learned a lot of stuff I didn't know before. But I got to the end and decided I couldn't write about it.

SA: Do you have a formula for finding emotional resonance?

Jim Shepard: It's not a formula so much as an intensiveness and a way of reading. It's reading for those moments that create more of a stir in you. It's something that I didn't have much of an ability with early in my career. I read a lot but often I could only conceive of how to apply it in a character who's obsessive about these things. If you look at *Love and Hydrogen* you can see early versions of it with "Krakatau" or "Mars Attacks," and those were easy ways into it. But quickly I began to realize that I didn't need that. There's something deadening about that model for a story, so I came up with some of the stranger stuff when I dropped it. Now I'll get people in Q & As who say, 'What makes you think you can write about a gay German filmmaker in the twenties?' and I'll say, 'What makes you think you can write about your sister?' It's all a matter of empathetic imagination, of creating a passable illusion on the basis of very few details. It's really about imagination for me—why were we given this amazing thing if we're not going to screw around with it?

The new collection is all first person narration. My agent, who is despairing of ways to sell my stuff, asked me about doing a book of all first person narrators. I had nine stories at that point. When I went back and looked at how many of those were first person, I realized they were all first person. Almost none of them are contemporary though. That comes from, I think, a different approach to nonfiction.

BF: Do you think of yourself as a writer's writer?

Jim Shepard: No, I don't. I'm often described that way as a complement, which really means, 'Writers like him but nobody else has heard of him.' Ron Hansen interviewed me and asked that question and I said I get that in a lot of reviews and I think it's code for, the only people who have read this guy are writers. The best evidence I have that I'm not a writer's writer is that I win almost no awards. I'd think a writer's writer would be getting awards all the time, but, as I told Ron, I've won fewer literary awards than Charo.

SA: How do you explain this weird gap between being a cult figure in M.F.A. programs and then not seeing someone read your book on a plane?

Jim Shepard: I was really struck when I was touring for *Project X* and *Love and Hydrogen* how if I went to Brooklyn, I'd get 150 people, and if I went to Boston, I'd get 8. I'm beginning to realize that my demographic is twenty-something or thirty-something. Some of that has to do with the McSweeney's crowd, like Dave Eggers, who have been really active. I'm happy with it the way it is. The world leaves me alone and I get to do whatever I want to do, which is pretty great.

BF: Do you think some of that has to do with you being a kind of master of the short story, which is a form read almost exclusively by writers?

Jim Shepard: I'd like to think that was it. I'd love to think of myself as a master of the short story, but that takes us back to the Charo moment. Part of it might be that in M.F.A. programs, there are more young writers excited about taking risks and are drawn to my stuff. When I first started out, the writers that excited me the most were the ones that I read and thought, 'Can you do that? Isn't there a rule about that? Is that literature, using a voice that doesn't sound like Henry James?'

BF: What do you make of all the M.F.A. programs popping up?

Jim Shepard: Well, it's such a money-making program for academia, for the universities. You just hire a couple of writers, set aside a classroom and you've got an M.F.A. program. I don't get all worked up about what a horrible thing it is for American literature because I've never believed that M.F.A. programs create a homogenized kind of fiction. Maybe they do that to an extent, but if you're a writer and you're at all interesting and you go to a place where everyone is doing dull stuff, you'll kind of rebel.

The other thing you worry about with a multitude of M.F.A. programs is whether they are taking people's money and filling them with false hope? Yeah.

Of course they are. But I wouldn't say that an M.F.A. program that doesn't churn out a bunch of successful writers is a failure by any means. If they're doing a good job of teaching, they should be churning out more readers, and more sophisticated readers. God knows we could use that. If a program were to produce a huge number of committed readers and no writers that we've heard of, God bless them.

SA: Do you think writing is teachable?

Jim Shepard: No, but I think development is acceleratable. I sometimes teach in programs like Breadloaf or Tin House, and I'll often get students in their sixties or seventies who have usually been writing for a while and there's always that poignant moment when they say, 'Ah, I wish I'd known that twenty years ago.' Obviously, writers develop at their own pace, but I think a good editor and a good teacher can accelerate that development.

SA: Tell us a little about your development as a writer. Do you think you were you born a writer?

Jim Shepard: I don't know if I was born a writer. I used to write stuff when I was little and I thought I would always do that, but I thought I would do it the way somebody shoots baskets or goes for a run. When I was in third or fourth grade, I remember thinking that I would always write in some form, but it seemed entirely possible that it would be a completely private and shameful thing that I did. That seemed like a plausible and non-tragic future. I came from a family where nobody had gone to college and so the idea that I would have a literary or intellectual life was not really an option.

My secret plan for a long time was that I would be a veterinarian and I would write privately and nobody would know. Then I discovered that veterinarians had to do more than just play with dogs. Then my secret plan was that I would write and not make any money at it but people would give me food, just hand me food because I seemed pitiful.

I always thought I would write fiction because it seemed like more fun to make stuff up. I never thought about being a writer until I started selling stories as an undergraduate. I was a person with no other real options. It was like, 'Do I want to go to an M.F.A. program, or...you know, I can't do anything.' When I told my father that I was going to pursue writing, he said to me, 'You know, writing could be a pretty tough nut to crack.' And I just thought, What wouldn't be a tough nut for me to crack? I mean, sanitation engineer, whatever, I can't do anything. I think writers, ordinarily, have pretty low horizons. You ask them what they think they'll be doing next year and they're just worried about the next paragraph. You're not thinking, In five years will I have written seven novels or six? You're really thinking, How am I going to finish page twelve?

SA: You've said before that you don't think you're really a natural novelist. Do you still think that today?

Jim Shepard: I don't know. All of my novels, except *Project X*, start really slowly and dick around for a long time before they gather speed. They're also very episodic. All of them have the strengths and weaknesses of *Nosferatu* where there certainly isn't a really good through-line. Maybe that means I'm just not a very good traditional novelist. I don't have any novels that I think are as strong as my short stories. There are parts of them I really like, and parts I read now that are shocking in a way.

It's almost as if someone showed you a video of your first date. You'd have just enough narcissism to be intrigued by it, and there'd be some parts where you'd even think you're cute, and then there'd be other moments where you'd just say, 'Turn it off!' It's like my first published short story, "Eustace," which was published in *The Atlantic*. I only sent off because my teachers told me I should. Then when they took it I just thought, cool. I didn't realize what an incredibly big deal it was until I was walking down the hall at my college and a poet who taught there who I'd never talked to stopped me and said, 'Shepard, did you just have a story taken by *The Atlantic*?' And when I told him I did he just said, 'Shit!'

BF: Can you tell us a little about your process for writing a short story?

Jim Shepard: Well, one of the things that I like about short stories, especially in the first person, is the way my narrators have no patience for the literary mistake of middling around. I sort of did a clumsier version of it with the football story, "Messiah." That's what I've been trying to teach myself to do with these obsessive voices. All that throat clearing of traditional short stories is something you have to get past as quickly as possible in order to get to that essential question, 'Why am I reading this?' I'm stopping my life for this, but why? I want a voice to come across right away and say, 'You want to know why you're reading this? Here's why.' With "Glut Your Soul," that's pretty much where I started—trying to tap into that adolescent rage where everything just fucking stinks. It's a great way to hit the ground running because those people, when I was one of them and when I knew them, really didn't dither around in the beginning. It's really a great introduction to extreme emotional states, which is really important to me. It's not so much that I would whittle it down with a story like that. It's more that I would wait for a coalescing voice in my head to come up with something like that to get me going.

BF: What about with a story like "Runway" where we're not sure where it's going for a few pages?

Jim Shepard: I think you're right, that's a very different model. That's one I wrote at Brown, and it's very much an example of someone twisting a traditional story model into the weird. Back then I was more patient with the traditional story opening. I'm not sure I would write "Runway" the same way if I wrote it today. In fact, I sent that story to *The Atlantic* in an earlier form and they really liked it but they wanted it explained why he was lying on the runway. I felt like that was the one thing I didn't want to do. Of course, I didn't want to not be published in *The Atlantic* because by then I knew what a big deal it was, so I thought, Let's see what I can do in the way of non-explanation explanations. I put those in there and *The Atlantic* editor said, "This is not an explanation." I tried three or four of those and

then finally told him I couldn't do it the way he wanted and they wouldn't publish it. Then I sent it to *Harper's* and they published it, so it had a happy ending. It was a good way to figure out that there was a strangeness that I was wedded to that would mean less success for me, but the whole point in that story was that there is an oblique place where you can't go.

BF: For you as a reader, what makes a good story?

Jim Shepard: One thing I really look for is an extremely high rate of revelation, where we're learning something new on every page. The writers who I admire most are doing that all the time.

BF: Who are some writers you admire?

Jim Shepard: Amy Hempel, Charles Baxter, Ron Hansen, Deborah Eisenberg. You never feel like you can just skip a page without missing anything important. They're all very different writers, so it's really a matter of how much I think I'm learning about human beings at any given moment.

BF: What do you make of the publishing trend moving away from new fiction and toward memoir and other nonfiction?

Jim Shepard: There are so many movements that are depressing that are overlaying each other right now. It's hard to know which is generating which. There are fewer readers in general, which means there are fewer serious readers in general, which means there are even fewer serious readers of fiction in general. As publishing houses change their philosophy from one where they're willing to take chances and settle for breaking even sometimes, to one where they think they need to make money with everything they do, that means all sorts of valuable writing is going to be pushed out to the margins.

With memoir, it's not too difficult to connect that trend to the trend of reality

television. But I know a ton of people, intelligent people, who say things like, "When I read, I want to learn something, so I read nonfiction or self-help books." Memoir plugs into that, but it also plugs into this narcissistic trend in our culture. The whole James Frey thing makes clear what the values are for people. They need to know that this really happened to somebody, and then the quality of the narrative is beside the point. It was striking the number of people who, before the Frey story broke, told me, 'You have to read this. You cannot believe the shit that goes on in this book.' And that was seen as incredibly high praise for a memoir. If you said that about a novel, it wouldn't be praise at all, which means that there's a sort of free pass that people give to a memoir. That's why Frey did what he did—he knew he couldn't get that free pass otherwise.

SA: Do you think you have a job or responsibility as a writer?

Jim Shepard: Yeah, I don't think I'm writing just to make noise. I can't think of any writer who I admire who isn't motivated politically in some way. Even writers who spend a lot of time burlesquing the notion of political writing, like Nabokov for example, I would say are quite political. You get Nabokov going on a subject like the Russian Revolution and you know exactly where he stands. You also know what his values are, and if you know what someone's values are, you usually know how that would translate to any given political situation. What would Nabokov think of George W. Bush? Not much.

SA: Is that how you get your politics across in fiction? Through values? Because your work doesn't seem extremely political, even when you're writing about John Ashcroft.

Jim Shepard: When I first sent that story to *Harper's*, they were very excited about the idea of a story from John Ashcroft's perspective, but then they refused to publish it because they said it was too easy on Ashcroft. I think it's a mistake to read that story and go, 'Wow, this guy loves John Ashcroft.'

On the other hand, it's clearly an exercise in stretching my empathetic imagination. It's like trying to write from the point of view of a villain or a monster or someone you usually can't empathize with. That story began because I was working on another story and I came across this news report of him having settled with the tobacco companies, one of the first things he did when he took over the Justice Department. I thought, How do you live with yourself when you do that? So I tried to immerse myself in his speeches and writings and theories, trying to figure it out. Clearly, this isn't a guy who's crying himself to sleep every night. What does he say to himself? That's how it all started. My writer friends joked, after I published that story, that I should get ready with my audit. But in a way, it fulfills that impotent rage that I feel when I read about some of these things in the newspaper.

A Blues for Carlos

Steve Almond

You'll never read this, this song for faggots and brains; you're destined to become one of the toughs, dedicated to small acts of damage, laughing out the side of your mouth at the firecracker you shoved up a cat's ass, at the chisel you made in shop class and what it could do, kissed by the reefer, with a lighter and oily skin.

Whatever happens next happens; there's no angle in reflection. You'll find crime anyway, some bad business turned on those who terrorize you with concern, your body given over to the brief fame of catastrophe, your hate so pure it becomes a kind of doomed love.

There's no other word to describe the scrape of asphalt along your skin, the tender bruises you secretly touch, the punches thrown until the sound of your pain becomes music, a blues for three instruments: voice, bell, and slow trumpet.

This Is for You, Morris Rosenthal

Steve Almond

Who sailed out of your mother's home on the end of your father's boot at the age of eight and studied talmud in long stone halls, ate humbly with strange families and later, in the Czar's army, wrote love letters for pale Cossack boys, trading fatted sausage for the black pumpernickel on which you subsisted for three years.

At the *gymnasium*, you saw a professor make a rainbow from light and mist and this made you an atheist, though the truth is doubtless sadder, the slow rot of belief.

In Harlem, Morris, you became a dentist of brutal and outmoded methods, hammered fillings, glued bridges, pulled your own teeth out one by one. You married a woman too young and beautiful. Your children grew American in attitude: privileged resisters. You never earned enough, the stove went cold before dawn.

At night, locked away from your riotous family, you studied again, carved a manifesto onto long yellow tablets. Your children became Communists, lovers of the brutal, and your wife fell away from you, into the fist of God. Nights, by dim lantern, memory yanked you awake, shivering. Where were you? Bialystock? Sedgewick Avenue? Babylon?

You didn't believe in Babylon, not anymore. You hoped to prove the Torah was not a holy book, but a tale of doubt and exile, mistakes and contradictions. This shouldn't have been so hard. The proof was your life. But your life, year by crumbling year, led you backwards: to the rainbow, the pumpernickel, the stony halls of study. And your hands, pitching the pages onto the embers, trembled.

A Smack of Jellies

Joe B. Sills

Phil finds that bamboo sword in his basement, he beats it against a tree in his yard, he's laughing, he says he's sorry.

"Wanna try?" He asks, he holds out the sword.

No.

"You mad or something?"

No. Do you at least know where she went?

"Who cares?" He brings the sword back over his shoulder, it meets his neck, it meets his sweat, he lets it go. Bark splatters against our jeans. "She'll be back soon. Really."

Phil, I went to the police.

"Right, so you're mad. Look, I really thought I told you."

You forgot.

"Okay, fine, here, take the bamboo. Hit me as hard as you want, but not in the face and not in the balls, okay? Okay?" He nods happily.

Okay. Thanks. My fingers, they're squeezing into the leather handle, they're bobbing the sword up and down, they're understanding its weight. I crack Phil in the face and forgive him. Thanks, Phil. I do feel better, thank you. You alright?

Phil presses his forehead into the ground, knees tucked into his abdomen He murmurs something, oozing sound into the grass.

Hey Phil. You alright? Phil?

Three months later he buys a dagger, says hey look at this, he stabs that tree.

The blade is rusted and there's a lion carved in the handle and Phil says dude it's gotta be from Thailand or somewhere.

Phil was right. Ruth comes back, she comes back filthy and cooks me pasta, she takes a shower. She walks up the porch, doesn't knock, she's filthy, I tell her to come sit down and she doesn't. She makes me dinner. I tell her that she is fine, just fine, and she agrees, "Yeah, I'm fine."

You're fine.

"I'm fine."

I went to the police.

"Why?" She slides the plate towards me, the ceramic grinds against dust.

Ruth, I say. I stand up and take her arms and I say her name, feel the mud in the shirt she's wearing. Is this my shirt? I wonder. She's biting into my lips. I think it's my shirt. I just say her name and go to the police again, I fill out more forms, I buy her that fishing pole she wanted. She doesn't even know how to fish. Never learned. I break it against my shin. She's sucking on my neck. And later, when Phil buys that dagger, she leaves again. It has a lion carved in the handle, the metal is brown and its edges are crumbling, he stabs that same tree and wants to know what happened.

"Well did you at least find her? What did I miss?" He stands on his toes and slashes through a leaf. "Dude, you should've fucked Dana. You fucked her, right? I mean, she had a cute face. You must've fucked her."

I went to the police. She's tugging at my hair. I just say her name, fingers recalling the shirt's texture, yeah, it's definitely my shirt. God, it's ruined. It's full of grainy streaks. I say Ruth, her name, don't do that again. Okay?

"Don't do what?" She's taking off my pants.

Phil says yeah, you fucked Dana. He says I must've fucked her, that there's no conceivable way in which I could not have fucked Dana.

No, Phil. I never fucked Dana. I went to the airport.

Dana drives me there, but we arrive too early, we look at each other over the roof of her car and ask well whatya want to do? So we go to the aquarium, that's what we do, we ogle over a jellyfish exhibit.

We're waiting in line for tickets.

I tell Dana. I tell her that there are too many kids here.

She whispers back, just above the hum of the crowd. She's so goddamn shy.

"When does your flight leave?"

About an hour I think. Are there always this many kids around?

She shrugs and a double-decker stroller squeaks past, leaned against by a worn man, he shuffles his feet, it holds two, pink, whiny faces.

We share a cigarette. We share a hot dog.

I can't have kids.

"Me too."

I'm going to live in seclusion.

"Me too."

It's horrifying, all these clueless parents with their shrieking little children.

"Yeah. I know. Ooh. I feel real gross." Hiccup. Hiccup. "When does your flight leave?" She stuffs the hot dog in my hand, we go inside and stare at jellyfish, I kiss her neck, she drives me to the airport, says she'll probably move to Connecticut, I think it was Connecticut, before I get back.

Maybe you could come visit sometime?

"Yeah, maybe," she whispers. "I'm gonna throw up, but good luck with your friend, okay? Have fun in Iceland." She weaves away, one hand over her mouth.

I woke up on the plane, I was so thirsty.

Ruth, I say, just her name, with my fingers in her shoulders and my lips by her ear. You're fine.

"I'm fine."

You're all dirty.

"I know."

Are you wearing my shirt?

"Possibly."

I don't think you're fine.

She makes me pasta, she's pulling me into the shower, she's fine. Don't do what, she asks. She leaves for Iceland, she tells Phil, not me. He buys a dagger at a

garage sale, stabs his trees with it, says oh yeah, definitely from Thailand, what do you think man?

The light in the aquarium was squeezed through glass and water and glass. Too dim to see. I groped against the walls, my palms slid down the tanks, Dana took my hand. Okay, I thought. We fell into an empty corner. Our heads thumped against a tank. We turned. We observed. A jellyfish floated, inches away. It bobbed, took its time. Rubbed against the glass, took its time. I began to think practically, in lists: the nine-hour flight, the rented car, the ridiculous search, no, I don't need any one of those. So I kissed Dana's neck. She turned. Didn't smile. Nothing. And then she asked me, What? What?

A mother diffused towards us. She stood at my side, a tiny head pressed into her fat shoulder, it's red, it's made of skin, it's screaming, it sucks in air, it's screaming, "I wanna be a jelly! I wanna be a jelly!"

I wanna be a jelly.

I walk into the kitchen and say hi, where's Phil?

And Ruth says "Hey I can't get this fucker open," her hair shaking angrily over a corkscrew.

I can't either, so we call Phil over. He was filling up water balloons in the bathroom and is waiting to ambush us, it's such great plan, he refuses to come out from behind the couch. He comes out. He grabs the bottle and breaks its neck over the counter, drinks half of it right there to impress us, swallows some glass, gets the x-ray framed, saves the shards in another bottle on the windowsill. My stomach feels weird he says. Ruth widens her eyes, takes a half-step towards him. Her hands out. We leave him on the stretcher, asleep with needles in his arms. We get breakfast. Pancakes.

She snorts a chunk of cantaloupe.

So, how do you know Phil?

"Met him at the supermarket." Coughs on a raisin. "We talk a lot about fishing."

What, you fish?

"Sure."

You. You fish.

"Yeah. Well. I'm thinking about getting a pole."

Can't get her bra open she has to do it for me. She doesn't let me chase the raccoon out of my yard. We wake up and ask if our clothes are smelly. She knocks my toothbrush into the garbage, says oops, here, she hands it back. It's entangled in used floss. I wasn't going to look for her, I wouldn't do anything like that, I told her she was fine.

Iceland isn't as cold as I thought it would be and everyone speaks English which make me feel like a dick. The girls are pretty, they have pretty faces. It's winter, and between these widened nights the sun barely rubs against the horizon and that's a day, one day. I can't see. And when I get to the town that I thought at least rhymed with what Phil had told me, nobody has even heard of her. There's only one person there. She runs a hotel and I ask why aren't there any glaciers.

"No, no, there are glaciers," the woman in the hotel speaks slowly, so I will understand, "they are up north. They are melting."

I can't drive stick, I'm always yanking or pushing the wrong thing. The car grinds itself into sand under my feet. It has a digital compass on the dashboard I make it say N. I pop a tire and I don't have any spares. I wanna be a jelly. I can't cover all of the rent without you.

"Oh…I could get a friend to move in."

She means Dana. She says they just met each other at the supermarket.

"I just have to get away for a bit. You know?"

Good, I say, too strongly? Good, that'd be good. For you.

"And maybe we shouldn't talk for a while."

That's fine.

"I mean, I don't think we should even write each other or anything, just for a bit."

Yes. Fine. I'm telling you, fine.

"Yeah..." Ruth swats at the air. Go away, air. "I just think it would be healthy."

Ruth sent all her things away in boxes and said she wanted something healthy, so I figured something beige, something cushioned, nodding relatives, low-fat

breakfast cereals in bed.

But no. It's winter, it's Iceland. I'm in the car. Dimly lit clouds, a leather interior, I can't drive stick. The road shines back. I swerve and pop a tire on a rock.

I walk back to the hotel, I'm wearing two sweaters.

Dana doesn't speak. Not for the first week we live together. Lots of yes or no questions. I make her tea. She doesn't speak. I tell a joke and wince because it's the same joke, only an hour old. Mint or orange spice I ask. Wait, we're out of mint. But this orange spice stuff is pretty decent, you should try some, here.

"Thanks," she says, barely a word. I'm not sure her lips moved. She whispers something else and hands me a letter from Ruth. It's been opened. The words are written on some notebook paper torn from its spiral spine:

> These glaciers break quicker than you'd think. They could
> tumble right over me like a truck. Well, not exactly like a truck.
> I don't know. I should be free on Friday. Is Friday good for you?

We get better, Dana and I, it's amazing, full sentences, I should teach children to read, the poor, the retarded children. Phil calls and says yeah, she's in Iceland, so? Thought I told you.

Great. Hey. Phil. Can you die from a glacier?

"What?"

I mean, can they run you over? I dunno. Like a truck?

"What?" She told him where she was going, not me, him. "Look, she'll probably be back soon, so don't think she's dead or anything. I thought I told you."

You forgot.

"Huh, weird." He saved the x-ray. We left him in the hospital. We got breakfast. She laid one palm over the menu and asked the waiter what can you put in my pancakes.

"Well let's see," he twists his eyebrow in his fingers, like he's winding himself up. "—raspberries strawberries cantaloupe raisins pumpkin chocolate blueberries pineapple—"

"Stop. I'll take all of that. And a cup of coffee." She says there's too much stuff in the world and she can't keep up. She says she sleeps in scattered places. I'm not listening. I'm just wondering about her breakfast, and what happens to it after she swallows, and once I see her naked I'm just as baffled. I get the check, I excuse myself, I walk outside, I call Phil. He says the surgery was just fantastic, they're gonna let me keep the glass.

Cool. Hey. How did you meet her?

"We went out, couple years ago."

Oh. Oh.

"Yeah, we met back in school, just before we both left. Great girl, right?"

A raccoon raided the compost again, the compost that the upstairs tenants hate me for, they hate me for my pile of rot Ruth and I watched it from my window and I stood up to grab the broom but she pulled me back down to the couch.

"It won't come back if you scare it away."

Here we are, noses against the glass, watching a raccoon eating my moldy pickle ends. She heats up the cold fettuccini on a cracked plate inside my fridge, forgets the fork in the microwave, turns back around and completes a circle to the sizzle of tiny lightning.

"Hey," she bends down to look, she calls to me on my couch, it still crackles, the raccoon has found an onion, "is this still safe to eat? Will we become radioactive?" She giggles and takes a bite.

Her waist. I could it snap it over my knee.

Phil stabs the tree, he excites the grass below him and jumps in place and asks why I'd bother to go to Greenland to find her. He bought a dagger with a lion carved into the handle. He sticks it into the tree, pulls it out, he flicks it into the air. "You should've fucked that other girl. Shit. What was her name?"

You said she went to Iceland.

"Yeah? I'm pretty sure I said Greenland."

You definitely said Iceland.

"Oh. Sorry. Well shit. Did you find her? How is she? What did I miss?"

I toss Ruth's letter on top of the fridge, there's no real place for it, and jot a message back:

Good luck with everything.

But it doesn't matter how clever I think it is since her return address is smudged, it looks misspelled, I doubt she even knew the real one.

"Do you fish?" Dana breathes and looks at the fishing pole in the corner.

Phil probably would have told me to hit him with the bamboo even if he hadn't done anything wrong.

Hey. Phil. You're bleeding pretty bad.

The flight attendant poked at my neck, I peeled my face off of the backseat tray. She smiled down. "Anything to drink?" It floats behind her head, rubs slowly against her hair. Takes its time.

Water, please. The whole bottle.

I went to the police. Ruth comes back, filthy shirt on, my shirt, it went missing, doesn't tell me where she went, doesn't need my help, I buy her a fishing pole, she goes to Iceland, or maybe Greenland, she's fine, it breaks against my shin.

Do you fish asks Dana.

Dana sits by the window and reads. Drinks my tea. Never finishes a cup. I don't think she likes it. Her face, Phil's right, she does have the face. I lower a mug of peppermint tea in front of her, she looks up, yeah she has the face alright. I sit in the next room and masturbate.

I walk back to the hotel. It's dark. It's dimly lit. Ice is cracking. There's nothing to keep up with. I didn't have a spare tire, I had to walk, if I could see there would be some dirt and some road and some dirt, I wanna be a jelly.

She fed me some of her pancakes. They had turned purple with all that fruit inside.

Every night, she eats carrots before I go to bed. Eats them whole with the stems and leaves. Swats my ass with them as I slip past the kitchen table, flossing. Doesn't stop when I turn off the lights.

Can you at least chew softer or something? Maybe you could cook them.

"This is all I used to eat when I was a baby."

Yeah, you told me.

"My nose started to turn red I ate so many."

Yes, I know. It's four in the morning.

She slept on the couch, the floor, the porch. Now she wasn't sleeping at all. I lie on the bed and yell at the kitchen.

Go to sleep. Please. Now.

"I can't."

Take a pill. Take anything.

Crunching meanders past the door, it softens away into scraping footsteps on the front porch. I filled out reports on the fourth day, she came back, I filled out reports again, thanked the police who spoke sternly into their desktops and notepads and said yeah sure thing kid. She was filthy, wearing my shirt, it was ruined, I bought her a fishing pole, it snapped against my shin, do these pants smell bad? We ask each other in the mornings. What do you think? Here, smell 'em.

"They're good for another day or two." We never change clothes, there are holes in our underwear, handles for fingers, they pull off so easily.

Did you ever fuck Phil?

"That would be like fucking in a snuff film. Ever see a snuff film?"

No.

"Want to?"

I decide to sneak out after she falls asleep, because I can do that too. I can. I just have to wait till she's breathing with her mouth open. But she rolls right over me, says the bed's too hot, I'll be back, okay?

Oh. Yeah, just keep it down, I'm sleeping.

I leave soon after she does. Phil was setting off fireworks in his backyard, trying to hit the tree stumps, they careen off the bark and burst low in the night like harmless angry popcorn.

Hey, Phil. What's a snuff film?

"Hold on." His thumb wrestles with the useless flint of his Bic lighter, he sighs,

he discards it on the grass, he awkwardly hurls the firework in his other hand into the arms of the woods. "You got a light?"

No, I don't smoke anymore.

"Oh." The grass is wet under our shoes, and Phil's soles drunkenly chirp into the ground when he turns to glance at the pock-marked trees behind him. "Jesus, I'm so bored."

Phil says don't worry she went to Iceland and she's probably okay. He tells me on a postcard go fuck your roommate already and I have to burn it into smoke so Dana wont read it along with the rest of my mail. She drives me to the airport, we stop at the aquarium, I kiss her neck, she turns, doesn't smile. I was hoping she'd smile. It bobs against the glass, takes its time. Okay, she doesn't smile but that's fine, the face was all she had, that was it. But I was hoping she'd smile. Never fucked her, kissed her neck, a nine-hour flight, a leather interior and four-wheel drive and no spare tires, a jellyfish bobs against the horizon and that's a full day.

That shirt went missing from my closet months ago, and Ruth walks around wearing it and only it, no underwear, sets down a plate of spaghetti in front of me. Like nothing happened, like the shirt never belonged to anyone in the first place.

"You think I need help."

I don't think that.

"You thought I was dead," she's trying not to laugh, her mouth is doing that thing where it's working against her face, "and now you need to help me."

I wouldn't try to do anything like that.

"Sure you would."

You're fine.

I ask for water, rub my indented cheeks, there's a five year old chasing his sister, there he goes, he's chasing his sister down the aisle, I ask for the whole bottle, there's a jellyfish in the aquarium and in the flight attendant's hair and in front of the sun, it bobs against everything and takes its time. Phil taught me to drive stick, he taught me all wrong, the car is turning into sand, I'm getting lost and I wanna be a jelly, I would've done better floating in a glass tank.

We're lying on the bed. It's noon.

Where did you go?

Her face is in her pillow, she twists her mouth around her face and up out of the cotton so I can hear. "Just walked around."

That's great. But I want to know where you went.

She yawns, rolls in the bed, towards me. "I just walked around for a bit."

Clouds slide over the sun. The room dims, illuminates, dims, as if we don't know what time of day to be.

"I guess you could maybe come with me."

Oh. Well where are you going?

"I'll tell you."

When?

"When I go."

Her mouth slides down the side of her face. Back into the flannel.

She finds me another roommate to pay the rent. One with a pretty face that doesn't speak.

I can't see any glaciers.

There's a lion in the handle.

Phil says, Sorry, I was sure I said Greenland.

There's a lion in the handle and a chip in the blade and there aren't even any rivers around, I mean, christ Ruth you don't even know how to fish.

"I'll learn."

No, you won't.

"I will. It's easy. You just stand there and wait and then you get a fish. I have to learn these things."

What things? The rod is bent from that heavy coat hung over it, the one you never wore, the one that cost two hundred dollars, but you loved the feel of the pockets, like an extra pair of armpits you said.

I pop a tire, I get out of the car, walk back towards the hotel, the airport, the flight home. More children run through the aisle, I wonder what hole they're all seeping out of, what should be plugged up to control this leak of fresh humans. A smack of jellyfish hovers outside my transatlantic window. She ruined my shirt, I

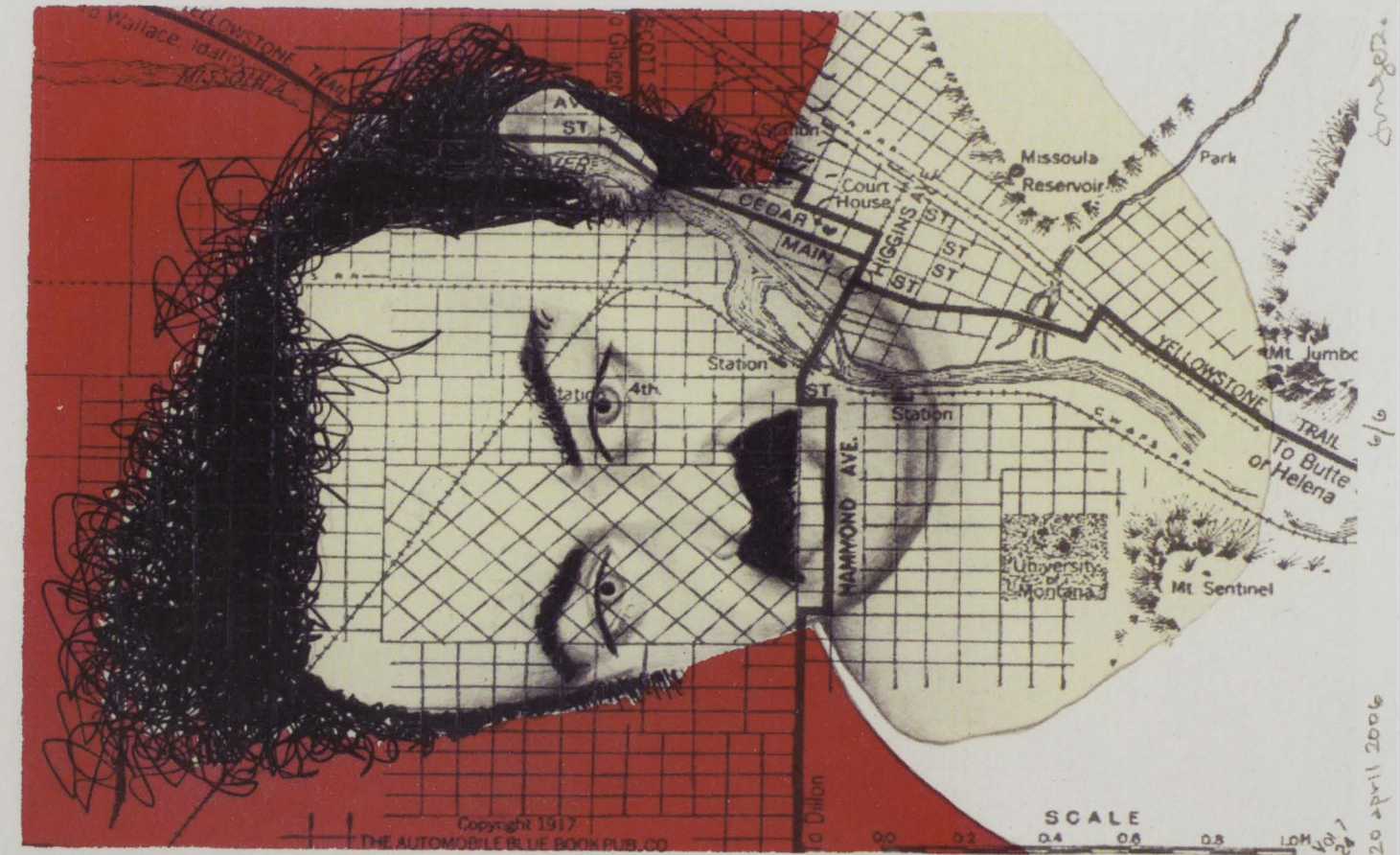
bought her a fishing pole, you're fine I said. Not in the face and not in the balls. I never saw any glaciers, but I could hear them breaking open.

The landing, the airport, the bus home, the walk up the porch. I turn on the lights. The fishing pole in the corner.

I push it against my shin and it snaps, it hurts, these things aren't meant to break, I bought the one tested for twenty-pound trout.

So how did it go, he asks. What did I miss?

The pole. It snaps, I'm sweating, I snap the pieces.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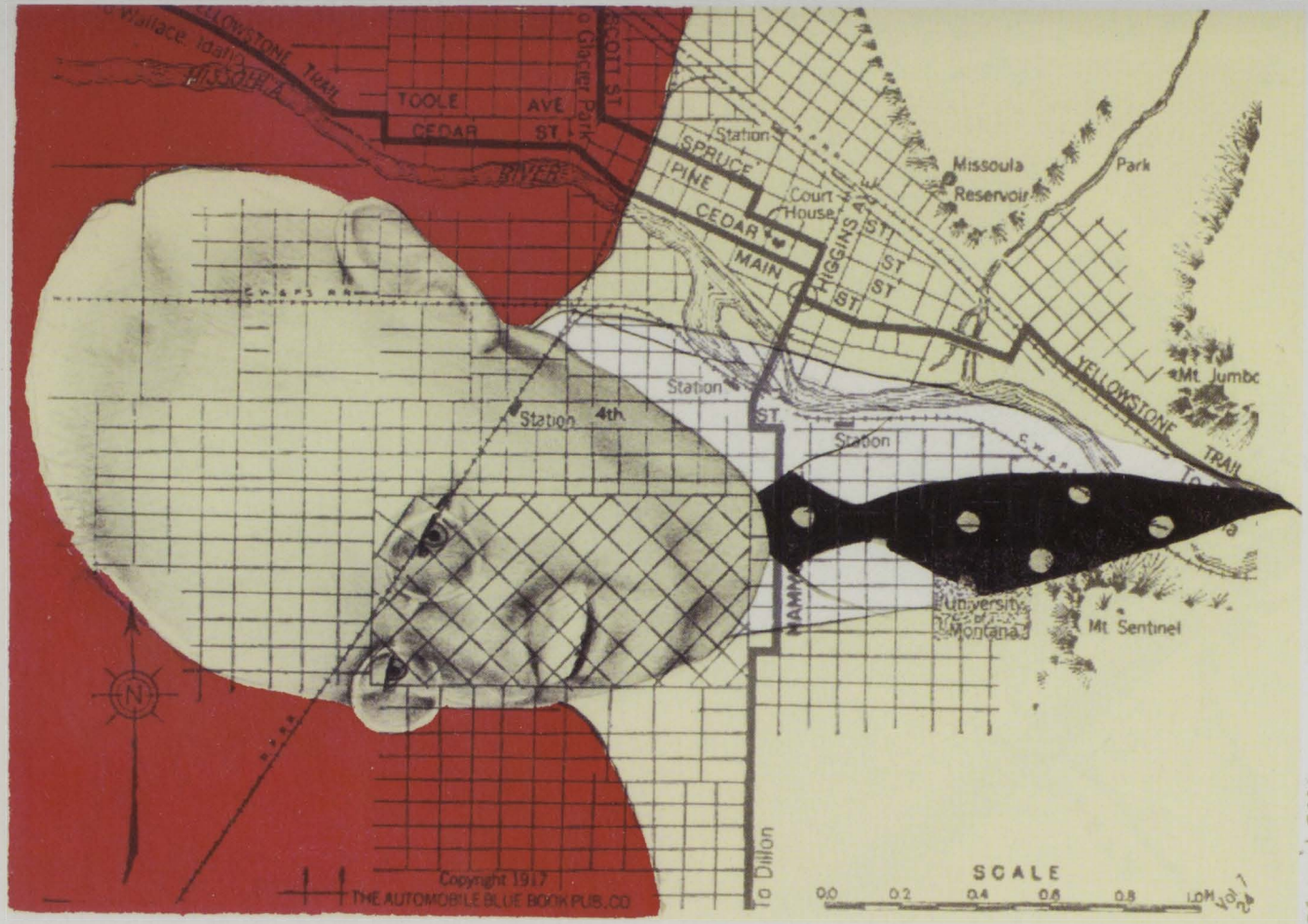
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Husbanding

Shena McAuliffe

The noun *husband* derives from two Norse words: *hus*, meaning house, and *bondi*, meaning occupier, cultivator, tiller of soil. This is all he is, and none of it. A myth, a seed, a companion, a jailer, a well-worn quilt of even squares. A strip of fine cloth, knotted firmly round the wrists. A web of sunlight in green water. A light-footed shadow nipping at your heels.

With infinite possibilities, how does a woman choose?

Apple Stems

Girls begin twisting apple stems at the age of five or six. In order to glean some insight to the name of her future husband, a girl grips the stem of her Jonathan or Pink Lady between two stubby fingers and recites one letter of the alphabet with each twist. When the stem pops off, the first letter of his name is revealed.

A girl learns quickly that she has a degree of control over her fate, depending on the vigor of her twists. If little Martin, for example, holds the key to her heart, she must, at first, twist gently, in order to uproot the tender fortune-teller upon arriving at the letter 'M.' With this in mind, a mother who wishes to see her sweet son married off is wise to grant him a name beginning with a letter falling not too early—but certainly not too late—in the order of the alphabet. Everett, Gregory, Hal, and Isaac are excellently marriageable names. J also lies at a strategic point in the alphabet, but J's run the risk of extensive competition. Xaviers and Zacharys

are rarely selected as husbands by the apple stem.

Watermelon Seeds

A girl stands with her friends, barefoot in July grass. She is ten. All the girls gnaw their watermelon slices down to the crisp white rind, and each saves three seeds in her sticky palm. There is a great deal of giggling. The girl names each seed after a male she wishes for her future husband: Derek, from school. Alex, her favorite cousin, who is sixteen and bought her a box of sparklers on the 4th. And Toby, from dance class at the YMCA. She sticks the slimy seeds to her forehead. As the seeds dry, they drop and are lost in the grass. The last seed clinging is the lucky, faithful one. (It's Toby. Her heart rejoices.)

In a variation, girls will name each other's seeds, choosing notoriously undesirable boys for their friend's. These stinky, poorly dressed, or knock-kneed boys add an element of danger and mockery.

Note: The watermelon seed method is decidedly unproven. There is little evidence or testimony supporting its accuracy and the pool of candidates is notably small, as the girl has only ten years to draw from. She still has many, many men to meet.

Odor

Dogs have over 200 million olfactory cells packed into their small, moist noses. If a young dog is trained to identify certain characteristics in a man, it can be a useful tool in the selection of a husband. It is well-known that dogs take a liking to some people and demonstrate immediate aversion to others. The trick in creating a dog that can successfully identify potential husbands is in teaching it to distinguish the scents of particular personality traits.

A family with a good deal of foresight will consider their daughter's eventual marriage when she is still a girl. Young children and young dogs delight in each other's company, so this is a convenient time for a family to acquire a pup. On a

Saturday morning, or some October afternoon when the leaves are spiraling and the girl is home from school, eating an apple or racing around the backyard with her new dog, her parents can call her in and seat her at the table. Mother sits beside her with a pen and a sheet of paper and the interview begins.

"Darling," Mother says. "I know you are but a girl and your future is still unknown—goodness, you've only begun school this year, and we've yet to take you abroad. There are so many, many things you will do in your future, and so many, many things you may never have a chance to do. None of us has any idea. But one thing we can almost count on is that someday you will wish to marry."

The girl is solemn. That she will grow up, that she will be tall and her hands will be spotted and creased, that she may care about a man or men: these are strange abstractions. Time barely exists, but she nods to her mother and her mother continues.

"If you will, Dear, please tell me what you might like your husband to be. Think about what you like in your friends, what you like about your father and myself. I'm going to take some notes. Say whatever comes to mind, dear."

And the girl will say silly things, of course. That she wants to marry someone with a large collection of teddy bears. That she wants someone who will let her walk around the house in his shoes, someone with soft, smooth cheeks, like her mother's. But there will be other things as well. There will be enough to get started on the training.

If she likes her mother for her soft voice, and for the way she smoothes her daughter's brow, the dog will be trained to smell the sweet ginger of gentleness. If her best friend is funny, and offers ideas for building shrines of oranges to the god of midnight, and of dead crickets to the god of music, the dog may be trained to wag its tail at the detection of divine gratitude (vaguely sweet, something of butter), or at the anise scent of creativity. A girl who likes to sneak into the attic or who stares, unabashed, at every stranger on the street—her dog must learn to smell the warm pungency of a curious and open mind. Almost every dog will learn to identify the acidity of betrayal and the dark plum of aggression. The fibrous, reedy scent of ambition is tricky, merging as it does with the bitterness of an insatiable

appetite for power. Genetic baldness: metallic. And lethargy: a sponge left too long in the sink. A dog must learn to growl at these. It must be taught to scratch madly at the curdled milk of pedophilia and to settle comfortably at the feet of one smelling faintly of walnuts, for he possesses compassion.

Checklist

Much later in a young woman's life, when someone has pressed her with practicality, she may devise a checklist. She no longer wishes to be a ballet dancer or a truck driver. Her hair has gone through a succession of styles of varying lengths. She has adopted modern practices, like purchasing a cellular phone and putting artificial highlights in her hair. Her eyebrows are wonderfully, archingly shaped and her upper lip is waxed to the smooth hairlessness of a two-year-old's. She mills about the country club clutching a designer handbag, watching young men in pressed linen stroll by, batting a lash at the ones with gleaming teeth.

A checklist will help her narrow the candidates and ascertain she does not find herself bogged down with an obvious dud. Checklists vary from girl to girl, depending on individual tastes:

- Possesses a sense of humor
- Taller than 6 feet
- Has brown eyes
- Wants children
- Smells like Ivory soap
- Smells like oak leaves
- Loves dogs
- Loves his mother
- Has a decent job
- Has a varied and rampant sexual appetite

Men are easily eliminated on the basis of a checklist as well:

- Too self-centered

- Not romantic enough
- Laughs too loudly
- Has slept with too many women
- Too smart
- Is a workaholic
- Has eczema
- Has pale, gleaming skin
- Believes in God
- Doesn't believe in God
- Has a varied and rampant sexual appetite

Advice

A young woman asks her elders for advice. "You'll know," they tell her. "You'll just know."

Geese

In a remote corner of the northern Midwest there is a unique tradition. When a girl of respectable upbringing reaches marriageable age her family hosts a tremendous party. It is held in the fall and the entire county is invited. The afternoon is spent pressing cider, chewing sweetened pine sap, and mingling. The young woman speaks with every eye-catching young bachelor. As discreetly as she can, which is not discreetly at all since the partygoers watch closely, she pulls the most interesting men aside and invites them to the "stoning." If a young man is in attendance out of duty and not desire—his parents are friends with her parents, or his heart is spoken for, or he finds the young woman unattractive—he can opt to build the fire that will be needed later, or he can tactfully disappear before sunset.

When the sun slides low and the sky is streaked, she takes her selected men, a group of no more than five or six, on a tense little stroll. The earth at this time of year is trapped in a cycle of freezing and thawing. Each night the ground freezes

solid, but by day it grows soft and damp anew. Each man walks alone down his chosen row of a harvested corn field, stooping to run his bare hands along the splintery stubble, or to knock his boots together, clearing clumps of damp mud. When his boots have grown mud-heavy for the third time, the man stops walking and stands rooted in his row. Mud gathers on different boots at different rates, so the men are staggered across the field. They turn to face the woman, who waits at the entrance of the corn field, her apron pocket full of stones she has collected in the month leading to the big event.

The group may wait an hour, or if they're lucky, only minutes, until a flock of geese glides overhead, calling each other through the crisp air. Their black bodies scatter and swoop, preparing to land in the field for a feast of forgotten kernels. The woman is ready: Madly, she flings her stones at the geese, for if she does not strike one with some force she may wither into spinsterhood. The geese will try to rise, flapping to lift their bodies, but they are slow. If a stone strikes a goose forcefully enough to daze it, or manages to bury itself in the goose's breast, the bird will fall. The man nearest will pick it up and tuck it beneath his arm, triumphant. If it struggles he will snap its neck, or shoot it quickly in the head, so it will not suffer long. He carries the goose back to the party, where it is plucked and roasted. The ceremony ensues; the man and woman fuse their lives. Feasting and dancing last all night. The other men, those not chosen by the fallen goose, are moderately consoled by the flavors of sizzling goose flesh, roast pork, and buttery corn melting on their tongues.

At dawn the new couple departs, arm in arm, beneath a shower of goose feathers thrown by the guests.

wwww.

The internet is an urban girl's matchmaker. A woman enters her statistics onto a website or two. She uploads a photo of herself—head tilted downward, hair falling slightly into her eyes. The photo is lit none too well, with shadows on cheekbones, and one glint in her eye. She describes herself: "Fun-loving, laid-back gal. I love to

dance, cook, and take long walks. Healthy and energetic…"

She reads about men in her chosen age group. In their pictures they stand on mountaintops or white sand beaches, or sit on porches bathed in golden light. "Rugged and romantic." "Never a dull moment." "Easy-going Romeo." Her heart doesn't swoon.

Yet success has been had. E-mails are exchanged—the prospective couple discusses family background. Both sets of parents are divorced. He has three step-sisters. Her little brother died of sudden infant death syndrome at six months. They describe past adventures: She scubas. He once stripped for a bachelorette party (Yes, yes, he was rather drunk). They both want children. They are in the same income bracket. He owns a bungalow. She rents a townhome. Technicalities are eliminated without the messiness of face-to-face interaction.

They meet for dinner. Over chicken cacciatore the woman sees that the man is actually better looking than his picture indicated—slimmer, taller than she thought, his skin such an enticing shade of brown. Her eyes, he sees, are wide and honest. She wears very little make-up.

The next week he cooks her dinner at his place, takes her strolling through the neighborhood.

Love blooms electronically.

College: A Myth

Myths abound in husband choosing. Young women often fall for such hoaxes as "The College Myth." You grow up, says this myth. You go to college. You meet the man you'll marry. You graduate and honeymoon in Hawaii. He works as an engineer and you cook dinners. You work for a pittance at the non-euthanizing animal shelter until the first bundle of joy comes along. Sometimes it does happen this way. But oftentimes, it does not.

A young woman, eighteen years old, goes off to college. Her father says, "Study what you like, dear. The career will come along later. College is for learning to think." So she studies Literature or Philosophy or the Russian language. She

eats ice cream with her girlfriends in the dormitory. She goes to parties and drinks beer and gains weight. At the recreation center she meets a young man—a geology student—and they are inseparable, for a year or two.

The woman goes home to spend Easter weekend with her family. At the farmer's market, with a shiny eggplant in his hand, the geology student meets a woman with striking red hair who has traveled to New Zealand. She ran barefoot through the jungle with Maori warriors, hunting wild pig. His heart spins.

Two weeks later he leaves the well-rounded Russian language student crying under a streetlamp.

Divine Intervention

As in movies, fate brings them together. He is on his way to his sister's house for a birthday dinner. He forgot to buy a gift. He waits in line behind a woman at the register and when she leaves, her wallet sits on the counter, forgotten. He picks it up, turns it in his palm. He fingers its gold clasp, examines her license photo, in which she looks ashen, but she is smiling broadly, with teeth. He calls her. He is a hero. The least she can give is her heart.

Suffocation

Visiting her parents at Christmastime, a woman walks up the stairs in the dark. Her parents are asleep, though it is not late. They sleep with their bedroom door open, now that they are old and she no longer lives with them. She hears her father breathing in his sleep, not a snore, but a *whooosh*, a little whistle on the exhale. In the hallway, the air is stuffy. For thirty-three years, her mother has slept beside her father, his whistling lilting through her dreams. The woman backs down the stairs and goes out walking with a cigarette, although she gave up smoking three weeks ago.

Resistance

Who needs a husband? He will require so much: affection, sex, silence, help choosing his wardrobe, his friends, his words. He is so much dead weight. Indeed, he is the tiller of soil, but this can be found elsewhere. He is all expectation and disappointment. One life is only so big. To make room for him—the multiplying, spreading, desirous, uninterested, ever-expanding bulk of him—a woman needs tremendous vacancy and tremendous excess. One woman can rarely spare both.

Sex

A woman is bound to grow bored with a husband. He cannot be her end-all be-all. Instead of a husband, she will seek a toy, and she will select him on a single criterion. Not his mind—ideas are fickle, both God and politics faltering under the fire of relativism. And a rich man grows so quickly stale, although if he is rich enough his money may provide diversion. Love, she decrees, will be about physical pleasure. She chooses a man who is swarthy and strong, tender and passionate, filthy and pure. The sight of him makes her sweat and tremble. If she is lucky, the passion will last a few years. If she is unlucky, never fear; she will find another—perhaps a woman, or a college boy.

Pregnancy

Also known as accident, carelessness, or fate, there are those who let biology choose their husband, and this is not always disastrous. This method is most successful for a responsible woman of deep character, unable to choose a husband for herself only because she takes this choice so seriously, so *forever*. She may have determined that, yes, she wants a husband, but she is paralyzed by choice, overwhelmed by possibility. She casts her burden to the wind. Together, they will raise their child.

You laugh, perhaps, or catch your breath. The juxtaposition of "responsible," "deep character," and "accident" are too much. Truly, this is a risky method for

husband-choosing; responsible women rarely use it. It is included in this document not as an endorsement, but only to acknowledge its existence.

The Already-Spoken-For (A dead end)

He carries himself with such grace. He is *committed.* His beloved, he says, is his anchor. But he touches the Single Woman on the shoulder once, maybe by accident. He pulls a bit of lint from her hair and she blushes. He finds this charming. But he is Unavailable. There is no danger here. He is in love. So they pursue conversations in a comfortable framework. There is nothing sexual going on. There is no tension. There is no doubt. He dotes upon his beloved—everyone knows how well their souls are matched. But what is this creeping flush, this occasional stammering when he speaks to the Single Woman?

Withering

Her hands are aging. She studies the veins, which seem to have swollen. The skin is brittle, finely wrinkled, like once-wet tissue paper. Pale brown spots have risen from some secret place below the surface. On the side of her index knuckle, between thumb and finger, is a smooth half-moon scar where, years ago, a jackknife entered her flesh, when she was whittling a canoe from a stick at summer camp. She remembers the scene: She did not wait to see the blood, but felt it fleck her face as she darted through trees to the nurse's trailer. She didn't need stitches, it turned out. It happened so long ago. How is this scar still with her?

Her fingernails are ragged and frayed, yellow when she doesn't paint them. Sometimes, in earliest morning, she wakes and her heart nickers, as if full with marbles. She is alone in her wide bed in the dark. The husbands, they go to bright-eyed nymphs.

By daylight, at the hospital where she works, she remembers the waking moment with guilt. She doesn't need a husband; she enjoys her life, she has good friends and independence. But in the bathroom mirror her hair looks brittle and dull.

A woman, Ella A., is walking her dog. She kneels to scoop its excrement into a blue plastic bag. Straightening, she finds herself face to face with a tall, narrow man. She recognizes him—from the laundromat, and from the library, where he works. It is mid-August, and hot. He is wearing shorts and his legs look strong, brown and thin. His name, which she has seen on his name badge at the library, is Henry, which she thinks is a little old fashioned. They talk about the library and the copy shop where she works. He tells her he has a sister, older by four years and married, who lives with her husband and her horse in Arizona.

Last week, Henry tells her, he drove through a valley in the southern part of the state on the way back from visiting his sister. He slept one night in the yard of a deserted church. When he woke in the morning, the bloody head of a cow was impaled on a fencepost near his tent. He tore his tent down, stuffing it in the car with the stakes dangling, some of the poles still fitted together, but before he drove away, before he got in the car himself, a man appeared.

"Sleep well?" the man asked. His hair, Henry noted, was in two solid clumps, like big dreadlocks. He wore tattered layers and his skin was thick and creased. He smelled of peppery sweat and patchouli. He put out his hand, "Cano," he said. "It's what they call me." Cano told Henry about the valley where the people grew hops for the brewery and about the weathered church where he lived with God. He slept in the choir loft. He pointed to its location on the second floor, above the entryway. Shiny hubcaps hung like ornaments from the windows. He grew potatoes around the base of the statue of the Virgin outside the front door. The cow head, Cano said, was for protection. He went on to explain, but his words blurred into Spanish.

All this Henry tells her standing in the street while her dog sniffs at his ankles and she clutches a stinking, blue plastic bag.

They ride bicycles together in the dark. Ella tells Henry what it was like when she was a kid, riding with the other kids in big, swooping arcs through the night. There were crickets and sprinkler puddles. There were potholes and, when they

were a little older, there was beer. At night, she says, it always feels like you're riding so much faster. And so, when they reach the top of a tree covered hill, they ride fast down the other side. Her hair is in her mouth. He pulls ahead, but neither of them can see through the dappled shadows of leaves. There are roots and cracks and they grip their handlebars tightly. The road curves. They ride faster, laughing.

As it turns out, Henry takes out his anger on inanimate objects: phone books, garbage cans, drawers and cabinets and computer keyboards. He sleeps on both sides of the bed and he likes her pillow better than his own. He doesn't like the telephone and doesn't like interruptions when he is listening to music. He listens to music actively, and usually, he listens to Ella actively, with nods and questions. He likes his coffee strong and without sugar. He smells of sawdust and citrus. He makes delicious key lime pie. He folds his tee-shirts into perfect, smooth parcels, and stacks them in the drawer according to color. She learns many things beyond this. Some things are pleasant; others are not. Henry's scale tips towards the pleasant side.

They make love with their socks on.

His house is very, very cold.

There is sand in his bed.

When Henry was growing up his father was distant and absent, always working, suing oil companies for irresponsible stewardship of the environment—a noble cause. Could a child complain? His mother doted and called him, he confides, her turnip.

Ella's father had a quick temper. Her brother, older by two years, despised her when they were young and slammed doors on her fingers when he could. He hung her dolls from jump rope nooses, scarred their plastic by harnessing sun with a magnifying glass. Her sister was too young to get involved, a six year gap between them. Ella and her brother reached a truce in high school. He translated male language for her before she needed the translation. Boys didn't notice her until college, and she didn't really care.

Henry and Ella move in together—her place. She has a garden in the summer and working heat in winter. He brings his dishes: an unchipped, matching set.

They travel together, to Hungary, and dance in a circle with sawing fiddles

and stamping feet. The Hungarians sing words like winter wind through branches. Henry and Ella stomp and whirl along. Later, one dancer writes a translation on a scrap of paper and they learn that the song was about apples falling from a tree.

But as they travel his uncertainties bother her. Her timidity provokes him to slam drawers and telephones. They barter in the markets for tomatoes and carved wooden toys. She is better at it than him. He always arranges their lodging situations and she lets men speak only to him, which she would never stand for at home.

Home, they bore each other with complaints. Before bed he drinks bourbon to help him sleep. She rises late every morning, lying in bed awake, but motionless, staring out the window from her pillow.

She cannot walk away. She doesn't even want to. So they spiral into oneness and she listens to him breathe in his sleep, and thinks of life without him, how quiet it would be, how deathly silent.

American Gas

Vincent Precht

It's a sunny day in March, and I'm driving behind a bus, ten blocks away from American Gas. Michael, a teenager on my caseload, is riding the bus to work. He's a nice kid, but low, low, low. Big old thing with terrible balance. I pull alongside of the bus, and he smiles at me, gives me the thumbs up, and I give it back. "You think you'll ever amount to squat?" I sometimes ask him. I say it like a joke and he laughs: "Har har har, Mr. B. Very funny."

I ease up on the accelerator and let the bus slide away. I've been training him for six weeks. I wrote in his transition plan: *Michael will ride the city bus to work.* Until today I've ridden the bus with him, supervised on the job site, held his hand. Now, I'll still shadow him, but from the comfort of my '71 Nova. When he gets to work, I'll watch from across the street.

I bullshit. You have to if you want to find work for these kids. Got Michael a job at a discount station in the foothills: American Gas. It was a cold, drizzly day, the torn-up clouds brushing the frosted peaks. I was chasing Mr. Andonian around—the guy who owns the place—filling him up with facts and figures.

"My job," I said, "is to find ways to increase productivity."

Andonian was dropping hoods, snatching up pieces of trash.

"For example," I said. "Why should you be picking up trash? You're the owner. You should be inside." I started to laugh. "It's cold out here."

Andonian looked at me for a second. Tall and trim, he wore a blue warm-up

suit, high-top Jordans. Handsome guy with a neat goatee. I didn't like him. He was trying to put me in my place, never saying yes or no, making me slop through the rain. I barreled ahead anyway, making expansive gestures, explaining how Michael could pick up trash, clean windshields. I told him Michael was also a great gardener, showed him where a flowerbed could go.

"This place really has a lot of possibilities," I said, looking around.

It was a dump: two unsheltered service islands and a convenience store with peeling red, white and blue paint. Andonian had just bought the place, and the location wasn't bad (behind us, above the Arroyo, modern mansions sailed through the mist). But the place was so crapped out, all the traffic would pass it by.

I started rambling about beautification, image, corporate ID. Near the door stood Andonian's cronies, four old men in various stages of baldness, their eyes set deep in their heads. Andonian turned around and gave them a look. He thought I didn't catch it, but I've seen the gesture before: pointing from the hip, mugging "Who is this guy?" for his pals.

He stared at his Nikes for a second, then looked up at me. "I have no money for this," he said.

I just smiled at him. "Money? Who said anything about money? For you it's free."

I've worked at Occupational Center for fifteen years. I've placed hundreds of teenagers in fast food joints, hospitals, corporate offices. One client has been shredding sensitive documents, non-stop, since 1999. Right now, besides Michael, I handle sixteen other kids, all with different disabilities. I'm good at what I do, but I've been known to lose my temper. My clients are bereft, beaten down. I don't need to pretend that everything is rosy. Everything is not rosy.

When I told Michael's mom about American Gas, she was all smiles, fluttering her eyelashes, asking a lot of questions. Where was the place? Could Michael get there by bus?

"Is there anything I can do to help?" she asked.

"Oh, no, Miss Dunbar. You've done so much already."

She looked like she had knocked off a cosmetics counter, her wide mouth glossed with shiny purple lipstick, her eyelids streaked with blue shadow and sprinkled with glitter. Three years ago, when I first met her, she was a mover and a shaker. "I represent musicians," she had told me. "Major recording artists," she said. Recording artists my ass. She was out of work, on welfare, moving with Michael from one relative to the next. Now, she had her own place in Altadena, but her ambitions were just as delusional. Something about becoming a lawyer, something about going to school.

"This is a great opportunity," I said. I told her that American Gas would mean a new start for Michael. He had had several "new starts," but I didn't get into that. I told her not to worry about the Social Security, that he would still get his benefits. I found myself staring at her fingernails. About an inch long, they had butterflies painted on them.

"How long did those take?" I asked.

She scowled at them as if they'd been naughty. "Hours," she said.

The next day we went to work in the All Purpose Room at the Center. The first "bus" Michael rode was made of folding chairs. A big Baby Huey type, he crashed around a bit, dragging the chairs out of position, knocking them over. He wore baggy pants, a baggy Lakers jersey. His lips were huge—"fishy," the kids at the Center called them—his eyes round and bulging under half-mast lids.

I was the bus driver. "That'll be three bucks, bub," I said.

"Bub," he said. "That's what I gave you."

"You gave me $2.85," I said. I watched him fumble with his change purse, making a mental note to enlarge the grip on the zipper. I got a whiff of his B.O., and later we talked about it. Michael is very touchy, a real momma's boy.

"Don't yell at me," he said.

"I wasn't yelling, Michael. I was trying to tell you something."

He started crying.

"Use deodorant," I said.

That night, I sat in my kitchen, writing in one of my notebooks: *Michael will*

locate deodorant at the store. Michael will pay for deodorant. Michael will use deodorant every day. "Task analysis": breaking a skill into steps. After awhile I found myself nodding off so I put the notebook away.

I live alone. Three years ago my wife Linda left me for another man. Sometimes if I can't get to sleep, I start thinking about it, like a bird of prey, circling but never landing. I live an orderly life in a one room Hollywood apartment, exercise regularly, read articles on learning disabilities when I have the time. I haven't dated in four or five months; I find dating too discouraging.

The first time we got on a real bus, it was almost empty, just a little old lady sitting in the back. We started toward her as the bus began to move.

"Well, where are you going to sit, Michael?" I asked, following behind him.

"Not next to her," he said, pointing at the lady.

"Don't point Michael."

He looked back at me.

I said, "Why aren't you going to sit next to her?"

"She needs her own personal space?"

"That's my boy."

Michael's huge dopey grin can really throw you.

"Why are you staring at me?" he said, after we'd taken a seat.

"I'm not staring at you. I'm just looking."

"Mr. B, you worry me."

When we got to the station, Andonian was busy, so I got things rolling myself. *Michael will clean car windows.*

"Hello, Miss," he said. "And welcome to American Gas."

"Miss" was about a million years old and drove a Cadillac Seville. She looked terrified. She had a green tube coming out of her nose, an oxygen tank riding shotgun. Michael asked her if he could wash her windows, and she nodded meekly.

He went to work with his squeegee as I cradled my clipboard, nodding to ol' Blue Hair with my Friend-of-the-Handicapped smile. Michael was having trouble

with a couple of hardened bird droppings. He was scraping so hard I thought the windshield would cave in.

"Sorry for taking so long, ma'am," he said. "You got a lot of shit on your window."

I winced, shooting a glance behind me to see if Andonian was around.

"You shouldn't curse," she said to Michael, wagging a crooked finger.

I ducked down to the window. "I'm sorry, ma'am. First day on the job. I think he's a little excited."

I was relieved when she gave me a wink. "Oh, that's all right," she said, her eyes turning to Michael. "You keep up the good work."

And that's how the day went. Every so often a Cherokee or Land Rover would pull in, affluent types who seemed to enjoy the fact that Michael was a little off. I pulled Andonian out of the store, pointed to a business man chatting with Michael from his Hummer H3. "You see. They like coming here. They think they're doing something good."

He didn't say a thing, just rubbed his beard.

That Andonian. What a barrel of laughs. His black shirt had a flaring collar and was open at the chest. His cronies were standing nearby, smoking cigarettes, flicking ashes, stiff and unsmiling in that Old Country way.

I walked over to Michael as the Hummer drove off.

"What's next?" he said.

I took him to a little island of dirt near the intersection on the corner.

"Get a rake and clean this trash up," I said.

Michael started raking away, stuffing a garbage bag with cups and candy wrappers. I got the feeling that someone was watching us, but Andonian was with his buddies, under the hood of a 320i. I scratched my head like an idiot until I figured it out: Michael's mom was parked across the street in her beat-up Toyota.

I crossed over. "Look," I said, "You've got to stop doing this."

"What am I doing?"

"Spying."

"I'm just watching."

My chest constricted as I raised my voice. "Ma'am, if you don't trust Michael, how's he ever going to trust himself?"

I had my arm on the car roof. I took it away and my shirtsleeve was smudged with dirt. I squatted down to the level of the window. She looked straight ahead, her fingers drumming the steering wheel, then tightening. Unicorns. There were unicorns on her nails.

I lowered my voice. "I really want this to work. I really need you. *Michael* needs you. He needs your support."

Her red eyes turned to look at me and she wiped her nose with a quick angry swipe. She twisted the key. The engine coughed and rattled. The tires yelped as the car lurched away.

Sometimes after days like that, you feel okay at first, but then you get swamped. You're high and dry on this island and suddenly the island is gone. You begin to question yourself, like you're the one messing things up, like whatever you're doing to fix things is only tearing them apart.

I lay on my futon, staring through the window at the salmon-colored clouds. The phone rang. It was my ex-wife Linda. She liked to call, once a month, just to torture me. She had a cool place in Silver Lake, a great design job, a soulful boyfriend.

"I'm moving to Paris," she said.

I grimaced behind my cordless as she filled me in on the details. Work was sending her; she'd be living there for a year. I tried to be enthusiastic, some part of me wishing her well, but I couldn't pull it off.

"Are you okay?" she asked me.

"Me? I'm fine, I'm fine." She started down-playing the move, and that made me feel even worse. "You're crazy," I said. "I would kill to live in Paris."

She didn't call to torture me. It was worse than that: she felt guilty. As I hung up the phone, a stupid movie started playing in my head. Scenes from our blissful marriage. Three years ago they would've made me blubber, but now the images seemed gratuitous. Journals lay splayed around my futon. I started to read one and fell asleep.

Michael will remember to wear his cap.

"Where's your cap, Michael?" We were riding the bus. It seemed like a reasonable question. Occupational Center wouldn't shell out for the uniform, so I had paid for it myself.

Michael felt his head, gave me a wide-eyed, bewildered look. "Shit," he said, after I had told him a million times not to curse.

Michael will clean the restroom.

"I can't," Michael said.

"What do you mean, you can't?"

"My mother says I can't."

I came out of the restroom. Andonian with his cronies. Smiles exchanged. Was something funny? Was I the butt of some joke?

On my cell phone with Miss Dunbar, keeping it cool, everything hunky-dory: "Ma'am, how *are* you?" I explained my situation. That's how I couched it: "I've got this little situation." Funny thing really. Michael seemed to think that she didn't want him to perform certain duties, normal functions of his job.

"My son isn't cleaning any toilets."

"Well, actually, ma'am, that's just a small part of the—"

"Is he there? Put him on the phone."

Andonian was nearby, so I turned around, lowered my head. "Miss Dunbar, Michael is working."

"Where is my son? I want to talk to him."

Michael will clean car windows. He was great at that. That's all he knew how to do. I ended up cleaning the toilets. While he was outside chatting it up with the gentry, I was in the bathroom on my hands and knees. One of Andonian's cronies came in and started pissing. I looked up and there he was, shaking his fat shriveled dick.

I backed out of the restroom with the mop and bucket, the gray, dirty water slopping over my shoes.

"What the fuck is happening here?" It was Andonian.

I mumbled something about a misunderstanding. "Michael is more of a people person," I said.

"Well, where the hell is he?" He turned to throw an angry finger at the service island.

No one was there.

When I got to Michael's house the Toyota was behind the driveway fence, beyond it a couple of defunct Mercedes diesels, covered with blue tarps, cramped fender to fender against a detached garage. Everything was sagging with water, soaked by the recent rains. As I climbed out of the Nova, a rottweiler jumped at the driveway gate, jingling the hell out of it, snarling and barking. Poor people, with their attack dogs, their second-hand cars. Crap all over the muddy front yard: dumbbells, car parts, twisted-up towels. "Filth," I mumbled as I knocked on the steel security door.

I stepped back as it opened. Miss Dunbar glared at me, her left penciled brow raised imperiously above the right. Behind her, stood the boyfriend, Anthony, short and stocky, his folded arms bulging with prison yard pecs. Miss Dunbar led me into the kitchen, and Anthony followed. We didn't speak. I took a seat at the kitchen table, Miss Dunbar sat opposite, and Anthony faded into the background, leaning against the stove.

Miss Dunbar. Eyes narrowed, hands folded on the tabletop, a fake Prada handbag pushed to the side. I tried to match her unblinking stare, she in her knock-off sweat suit, her plastic hoop earrings. Bitch. Who was paying for all this junk? Where was Michael?

"Miss Dunbar," I said. "Whatever it is, whatever's bothering you, we can work it out. But I just want you to know, at this point we are *running out of options*." I could actually see my words, the italics. A pulse pinged at my temple. I blew out a puff of air. "You can't just pick Michael up like that. Michael is an employee. *He was working.*"

There was a metallic creak as Anthony shifted his weight against the stove. All this talk of employment was probably giving him the willies. I should know; I had tried to place Anthony back in 1996.

I looked back at Miss Dunbar. Her eyes could have driven nails. Fuck if I cared. So could mine.

"I was taking my son out for lunch," she said.

"Ma'am, Michael has a lunch hour. You know that."

Her lips went pouty, quivering, puffing up. Her eyes began to glisten, and I thought, "No, please. Not again."

I tried to maintain my pissed-off demeanor, reminding her about the pizza parlor, the nursing home. The times she sent Michael to work unwashed or unshaven. Late. Not at all.

But then she started crying, her eyes turning into fountains, her bubbling lips making a *brr brr* sound. I looked away, searching the grimy cream-colored cabinets for strength. I hated being put in this situation. I'd been teaching Michael for three years. I had taught her boyfriend, for Christ's sake. We'd been through a lot. We were friends.

I stared into her eyes and covered her hand on the table. It felt tiny under mine.

She snatched it away. "Michael is a very sensitive person," she said. "I will not have him cleaning toilets."

"Michael has a wonderful sense of humor," I said. I don't know where it came from, but it seemed like the thing to say.

Miss Dunbar pulled a tissue from a cardboard box, started wiping roughly at her eyes. "He has *feelings*."

"Michael really cheers us up in class." I was on one of my complimenting jags. I couldn't help it.

She sniffled, wiped her nose. "Michael is multi-talented," she said, "multi-emotional..."

I found myself nodding like an idiot.

"Caring," she said, "kind."

"And capable," I piped in. "Very capable."

Anthony said, "He's a good eater. He puts it away. I'll tell you what."

We both stared at him.

Miss Dunbar blew hard into the tissue, producing a honking sound. She started shaking her head.

"I just don't think this job is right for him."

That perked me up. "Oh, no, it's right," I said, staring hard into her eyes. "It's definitely right."

Anthony walked with me to my car. Frowning at a mud-covered rag, he snatched it up and threw it in the trash. We stood in the front yard for awhile, staring down the street. Thick pine branches reached out over it, meeting in the middle, shaking out rainwater when the wind picked up. Anthony had recently done time, and we talked about that. He seemed okay about it, no regrets.

"I wouldn't worry about her," he said, turning the conversation back to Michael. "She'll come around." I didn't say anything, so he slapped me on the shoulder. "You gotta lighten up, Mr. B," he said, massaging the back of my neck. "You're all tense."

The next morning the birds were chattering at my window, and after three cups of coffee, I started feeling hopeful, renewed. At American Gas, business was hopping, Porsches cueing up behind Jaguars at the pumps.

In the afternoon I taught Michael how to use the air hose, filling bicycle tires for the neighborhood kids, showing him how the brass gauge rises to indicate the pressure. After giving a demonstration, I asked the kids if Michael could have a try, and they smiled and nodded, watching like clinicians while he inflated their tires.

Andonian ignored us, so I knew things were back to normal. I told him Michael would never leave work again, and he grunted and walked away. I didn't want to get into the issue of money. Things were still a little too dicey; I didn't want to push my luck.

Days passed. Michael gained more confidence, probably because his mother stayed away. I started noticing more cars. Or maybe it was the same cars coming more often. One or two in particular: an investment banker in a Lexus, a college student in a Mini. Michael knew them by name, and sometimes they would get out of their cars and talk to him. The old lady in the Seville, I'd always see her. I'd look over, and there she'd be, all hunched over and decrepit, her oxygen tank at her side.

She'd try to straighten Michael's cap, which was way beyond her reach. She'd end up going after his shirt, slapping at the wrinkles.

Sometimes, after work, I would take him to Denny's for a milkshake. He would clench the straw in his fist, pound it on the table, peel down the wrapper when the tip had driven through. Then, lifting the straw to his lips, he'd blow, shooting the wrapper across the table. I'd only let him get away with it if I was totally exhausted, or after a good day, when he had done something independently, something that made me proud.

"I was very happy with you," I told him one day. "The way you checked those paper towels."

An accordion of white paper hit me in the forehead and Michael started to laugh.

"That's brilliant, Michael. Very funny."

But I wasn't angry, and he knew it. He laughed even harder when I balled up my napkin and threw it at his nose.

"So," I said, staring at him for a moment after the waitress had dropped off the check. "What do you want?" I had to clarify. God, did I have to clarify. No, I didn't mean now; I meant in the future. (I knew it was an abstract question, but Michael wasn't a moron. I thought he could handle it, and I was curious. I wanted to know.)

"You mean, when I grow up?" he asked.

"You're grown up now. I mean when you're independent."

He rolled the straw wrapper between his fingers. "I want money, an apartment..."

I nodded.

"A car," he continued. "A sports car."

"A wife? Do you want a family?"

"Yes. I want a beautiful wife."

"Like your mother?"

"Mr. B, please," he said in a scolding tone. "Somebody *my* age."

I apologized as he turned to look out the window. The glare from passing cars

threw shards of light on his face.

"What else?" he asked, dreamily. "What else do I want?"

"You want your rights, Michael. You want what everybody wants." I took out my wallet, split it open, lifted out some bills to pay the check. "You want independence, you don't want anybody fucking with your head."

"Mr. B, you shouldn't curse."

"I'm trying to make a point," I said.

"I know but you shouldn't curse."

A few days later, I decided to approach Andonian on the subject of pay. I needed to tie things up. I had other kids on my caseload; Michael was taking too much of my time. Andonian had started painting the convenience store, and I suggested that Michael do it instead. I fixed Michael up with a roller, showed him how to apply the paint. He had a tendency to repaint the same area, so we had to work on that. But when given a chance, Michael can do just about anything, within reason.

I dragged Andonian out of the store to watch him. "He's a good little painter," I said.

Gazing at Michael, Andonian took a deep drag from his cigarette. He opened his mouth and let the smoke drift away. He gave me a sidelong glance and raised his eyebrows. He nodded his head.

"You don't find an employee like that everyday," I said.

"He's not an employee."

"I know," I replied, walking away. "That's the point."

Later, standing by the dirt-filled planter at the corner, I called out to him: "What kind of flowers do want?"

Andonian looked at me like he didn't understand.

"Flowers." I shouted, but he didn't hear me. I waved him off. "Never mind." I knew what to get.

Marigolds. I thought I remembered giving them to Linda and that they were hearty, difficult to kill. I thought I remembered transplanting them in our backyard, or that you *could* transplant them. Anyway, I remembered that they were cheap. I

bought a half dozen plants at the supermarket, a gardening spade, took them back to American Gas. Michael was painting with Andonian, so I took the flowers over to the planter, knelt down and started turning the soil.

The dirt was cool in my hands as I piled it to the side. I looked up, and Andonian was showing Michael how to grip the paint roller.

"Bingo," I said.

Michael will ride the city bus to work. Alone.

I prepped him the day before. He was watering the marigolds.

"I can't be with you all the time," I said.

"I know, Mr. B."

"Eventually, I won't be with you at all. You realize that?"

"Yes, Mr. B. Yes." He seemed distracted, so I shut my mouth. But I was nervous. I didn't want there to be any confusion.

On Miss Dunbar's answering machine I left a long, detailed message: Congratulations! Had she heard? From now on Michael would be making a salary. I explained about the bus, that he would be riding it alone. That he needed to be at the bus stop at exactly 6:45.

I felt like calling somebody, but no one was home. My two sisters, my brother. I even considered calling Linda. I was hyped-up, exhilarated. I wanted to tell her *bon voyage*.

The next morning I parked behind the bus stop, sat in the Nova and waited. The sky was sodden and gray like a piece of wet cardboard. I was wearing a lightweight jean jacket because the weather report had called for sun. The damn car guzzled so much gas you couldn't let it idle for too long, so I shut it down. Freezing without the heat, I huddled around the coffee cup, holding it with both hands.

I thought about Miss Dunbar. I had told her that when Michael started making a salary he would still get his benefits. I had stressed it on several occasions, and each time she had nodded like she understood.

Tiny raindrops started to prick the windshield.

Had she really understood? Maybe she thought if Michael got paid, the check from Social Security would no longer come. I thought about her clothes, her cars. They might've been cheap and fake, but she hadn't gotten them for free.

I looked at my watch. I looked out the windshield. The bus shelter pulsed as the raindrops hit the glass.

I thought about the pizza place, the nursing home—the same scenario. There was a pattern. Whenever Michael was on the verge of making a salary, whenever it became more than just me holding his hand.

The raindrops drummed loudly on the Nova's metal roof. The 6:45 swept into the bus stop and idled. I looked across the street—would Michael pull his big self out of a late-arriving car, wave for the bus to wait as he lumbered for its still open door? I threw my arm over the seat to take in the rear—would he stumble up the block hatless in the downpour, fishy lips cupped between his hands, bellowing, "Excuse me," or "I'm here?" I'd have been happy with any scenario, any excuse, no matter how lame. But don't give me this, I thought, tossing the empty coffee cup aside as the bus door pulled shut. Don't give me this vacant street, these unoccupied cars. Don't give me this bus pulling away filled with somber passengers, work-bound and competent, gainfully employed.

Don't give me this, *please*. I've seen it too many times before.

A pattern.

I leaned back in my seat. I slammed the steering wheel with my fist.

"He's sick," Miss Dunbar said from behind the security door.

The air was frigid, and rainwater was dripping down the back of my jean jacket collar.

"Well, can I see him?" I asked.

"See him? I said he was sick."

Was someone pouring buckets on me from the roof? Had anyone ever bothered to clean out the goddamn gutter? Anthony was standing beside and slightly behind her, both dimly visible behind the steel mesh door. Wasn't anyone going to let me in? I tried to remember my "teamwork" training. *Use "I" messages. Do not become defensive.*

"Ma'am, I think it's important that we let Michael make his own decisions."

"Don't you patronize me."

"I am not patronizing you."

"What're you saying? That I don't know my son?" She was silent for a second. "You don't think I know my own child?"

"Miss Dunbar, I didn't say that."

"Do you have a son?"

I started to respond but stopped myself. The bitch was goading me. I couldn't believe it.

"I'm asking you a question," she said.

I stared at her through the mesh door. We had had this discussion on a previous occasion, a happier, dryer time. "You know I don't have children."

"Well, then how you gonna know what my child needs?"

"I've been working with Michael a long time," I started to say.

"How you gonna know?"

My voice began to quake. "By asking. . . discussing it with him."

She clicked her tongue, chuckled and whispered something to Anthony.

He rubbed his chin. "That's a little vague, Mr. B."

I turned on him: "She's asking me how I would know!"

Just then, a frigid waterfall cascaded down the back of my neck. I jumped back.

"That's it!" I shouted. "If you want my help, call me. I will not be treated this way!"

The rain was coming down in pearl-sized drops. I slipped on the way to the car, my heel going out from under me, gouging a slick trough in the oozing mud. I drove off. I didn't know where I was headed. At an intersection I thought the light had changed and almost smacked into a car.

I was going to American Gas. I was going to apologize, tell Andonian I was sorry that it didn't work out. I was going to pick up the gardening tools. Act professional. Move on. But something about my footing made me dizzy. Like I had forgotten which pedal was the gas and which the brake.

When I arrived the rain had stopped. Andonian was cleaning up, sweeping out puddles of water with a push broom. I said what I wanted to say, but after I had thrown my things into the car, I started to say more. Much more.

I followed him into the convenience store. "I do everything for these people," I said, "these people" meaning poor people, these people meaning blacks. I followed him outside, babbling about "learned helplessness," other crap I had studied in school.

Finally, he turned on me. "What do you want from me?" he asked.

Rainwater dripped like diamonds from the convenience store awning. The clouds opened to the bright white sun, which streaked the foothills before reaching down to where we stood, lighting the steam that rose around our legs. For a second, squinting, I didn't know where the hell I was.

"What do I want?" I asked. "Nothing. I don't want anything."

Andonian shook his head, rubbed his mouth. "Look," he said, but then he stopped himself. I waited for him to say something profound. Spent and exhausted, I wanted him to reassure me. "Look," he said. "Go home."

That night, after a hot shower, I dropped off into a free-fall of sleep. In a dream Linda informed me that she was having a baby by showing me her pregnancy certificate. In the dream, I wasn't surprised. It all seemed perfectly normal. When I woke up, it took me a second to realize that pregnancy certificates don't exist.

I got to the Center early and started going through folders containing student reports. I put Michael's to the side and stacked the others in front of me. I went through each one, reading the reports inside them. Fastened to the tops of the folders, they were like layers of earth, the most recent on top, progressively older ones beneath. I kept seeing Michael's folder out of the corner of my eye. After a while I pulled it in front of me.

Michael qualifies as learning disabled because of a significant discrepancy between ability and achievement, his initial report said. I had to hold up a thick sheaf of newer ones to read it. As the pages dropped, Michael moved through time, from pre-school to the present. So many hands had been in the mix, so many signatures, mine

on the most recent ones, the names of past teachers on the rest. And not only teachers. Scrawled in spaces were other signatures, spaces marked Psychologist, Speech Therapist, Administrator and Other. The only name on all of the reports was the most legible one. I stared at it now: in a dark, heavy hand, on the line next to Parent… Valerie Dunbar.

As I waited for someone to come to the door, the plan was to change what I could and leave the rest alone. I glanced at the yard. It looked neater, like someone had straightened it up. I turned around, and inside the security door, holding it open, a strange woman was staring at me. I took a step backward. Miss Dunbar? Something about her made her look completely different. Smaller? Older? I couldn't tell which.

"Michael isn't here," she told me, the anger gone from her voice, her eyes flat and stark. Holding her robe, she opened the security door wider and stepped back for me to pass. For a moment I just stood there. I couldn't move.

In the kitchen, cardboard boxes filled with bread and canned goods were pushed against the wall. I stood gawking at them, wondering if they were donations. She caught me staring, and I hurried to take a seat across from her at the kitchen table.

It was the makeup. She wasn't wearing any. The lipstick was missing, the shadow, the glitter. The penciled brows that once soared above her hazel eyes had vanished, as if they had flown away.

I apologized for my behavior the day before. I told her I had been wrong to cut her out of the process. "Why shouldn't you be able to visit Michael at work? What's the harm in that?"

She stared at her hands.

I forced a smile. "How is Michael?"

"He misses his job," she said, after a silence.

"Well, we miss him, too. Really Miss Dunbar, I'm sorry how this went… If there's anything I can do…"

Then, without looking up, she said, "He's here."

I followed her down the narrow hallway to his bedroom. The room was spotless—books stacked flush on a dusted shelf, a bedside table neatly arrayed with bottles of medicine—but when I tried to compliment Miss Dunbar, she didn't respond, taking a seat in the corner and sitting in silence. Michael, propped up against some pillows, greeted me enthusiastically, sliding over so I could sit on the edge of the bed. I asked him how he was feeling, and he said that he was doing better. I told him he was lucky to have such a caring mother, and he said, "Oh, I know, Mr. B. You don't have to tell me that."

We both stared at her. At the end of the armrests her hands dangled limply, her fingernails unadorned. Suddenly, she grasped the armrests, lifted herself, and walked out. I stared at Michael. His eyes dropped to his big folded hands on the crisp white sheet.

After an attempt at small talk—news from the Center, greetings from kids—I said, "We've missed you, Michael. Mr. Andonian wants to know when you'll be back."

He stared at his fingers. He didn't speak.

"Michael, you're not sick, are you?" The room was silent. I leaned over to check down the hall. Empty. I leaned back. "Michael?"

Then, after staring at his hands a long time, he said, "I'm a little scared, Mr. B."

"Of what? Of the job?"

Still looking down, he shook his head.

"Of Mr. Andonian?"

He shook his head again.

"Of what then? Of me?" His eyes looked up at me, and I started to feel dizzy. "Michael," I said, "I'm your friend. I want you to succeed."

"I don't want to disappoint you, Mr. B."

"You don't. . . You won't," I said, correcting myself. I put my palms flat on the blanket. I could feel them sweating. I didn't know what to say. I started making circles with my hands, the blanket dragging between my fingers. Wanting to escape, I lifted myself from the bed, but something jerked me around before I could leave.

"Michael, how could you think that?"

It seemed like ten years before he looked up at me. "You missed me?" he asked.

The way Linda put it, the marriage was a mistake. That is, we were never meant for one another. It wasn't the truth. It was what she wanted me to believe. And it showed what lies we could convince ourselves to accept. I had made Michael sick? Only if I let myself believe it. If I let myself believe it, then, of course, it would be true. But now, now all that mattered were the facts. My Nova needed an air conditioner, for example. I was burning up.

Backing out of my parking spot at the Center, I swore that I'd get one installed. It was only nine in the morning, and already I was drenched with sweat.

"Yo, Mr. B…" Someone pounded on the roof of the car. I hit the brake as he flashed in the rear view and came around to my side.

"Anthony?" I said. It was Miss Dunbar's boyfriend. He squatted down at the window to talk to me.

"Didn't you hear me?" he asked. "I was calling after you."

"No. You were? What are you doing here?"

Something about my response made him laugh. "Shit, Mr. B. Nice ride." He ran his hand along the bottom of the open window. He checked out the dashboard, the rear seat. "AC not working?"

"It doesn't have one."

"I'd correct that. It's almost summer." He moved as I opened the door and climbed out. "Big news," he said. "The kid's back… Michael," he clarified when I failed to respond. "I just dropped him off."

"That's great."

Actually, it was a moot point; I had just taken Michael off my caseload, traded him to a colleague for a kid with Tourettes.

"That's good, right?" asked Anthony, puzzled.

"Yeah, yeah…" I said, forcing a smile, looking up into the hazy sky.

"It sure took some convincing," Anthony went on. "His mother was no problem.

She wanted him out of the house. But Michael, that boy is stubborn. It's okay though. I just told him he'd have to work hard if he wanted to grow up like me." Anthony made sure I was looking before he gave me a wink and exploded with laughter. "I'm just playing. I'm just playing. But really, you don't look too happy." And then, when I gazed up into the sky again, "What you looking at, Mr. B?"

A jet, glinting like a needle, traversed the sky.

"That's an F-16," said Anthony, shading his eyes. "You can tell by the wings." I looked at him, surprised. "You remember. Planes are my specialty. Got a bunch of models back home."

"You had them in the living room," I said, recalling the plastic models that hung in his mother's house.

Anthony nodded, smiling. "Still do."

The plane needled into a skin of high clouds. It glinted and disappeared.

I looked at Anthony, his forehead beaded with perspiration. "You're okay, right?" I asked.

He looked at me blankly.

"I mean your life," I said.

"Sure, Mr. B. Why?" But then he knew why and smiled. "Shit. That's ancient history. Oh, you know. I got my ups and downs. But it's okay now. I'm looking for a job." He studied me hard. "Look, Mr. B, you weren't the only one. You know how many people I had pulling for me? Teachers and social workers and aunts and uncles… I mean, sometimes I couldn't even squeeze into the house." I shrugged, and he said, a smile growing again, "I'm serious. What? You thought you were the lone warrior. I wish you were." Then, after a pause, he squinted at me, probing. "Mr. B, are you getting laid?" I stared back, deeply offended. "I'm just saying. It helps." He let it go, looking down the Nova's hood, asking about the engine. "What you got under there. A 350?" I nodded, still smarting. "That's a damn nice car."

We stared at it for a moment. He was right. I wouldn't have given it up for the world.

So. It's a sunny day in March, and I'm driving behind a bus, three blocks away

from American Gas. The bus comes to a stop, and Michael climbs off and walks the rest of the way on foot. While he walks he sways back and forth in a way that reminds me of kindergarten and the March of the Elephants. At one point he stops, lifts up his arm and smells his pits. He gets to the station, disappears into the convenience store and then comes out, staggering in the sun.

Parked across the street, I wait. Time for some coffee and the sports page. I lean my back against the door and settle in. Every once in awhile I check on Michael as he squeegees windows, waters the grass. One of Andonian's cronies has found a basketball and is dribbling it from hand to hand while one of his countrymen tries to snatch it away. Suddenly, in a burst of stiff-shouldered agility, he eludes the guy and pretends to shoot.

After awhile Miss Dunbar pulls up behind me, the snarling grill of her Toyota framed in my rearview. Anthony's with her, and I salute them with a little wave. In our separate cars we sit silently and watch. Michael has gone to the air pump with a little girl and is filling the tire of her bike. He's really getting into it—jabbering away, gesturing importantly, like a doctor explaining a complex procedure. The girl is about eight, fully outfitted in arm and kneepads, a mushroom helmet, which she nods up and down. I like a kid like that: polite, helpful, bracing the bike while Michael fills the tire.

From where I'm parked you can hear the groan of the air compressor. When Andonian steps out of the convenience store I pull myself up for a better view. But then there's an explosion, a loud bang, pieces of black rubber spinning through the air. The girl is still bracing the bike, and Michael is still kneeling. But now he holds the nozzle to a naked metal rim.

Everyone stares. Miss Dunbar, her hand to her mouth; Anthony climbing her arm. Andonian, knees bent, like he's ready to jump; the old men leaning in the same direction. *Me.* My heart is pounding. I have to laugh at myself. I've never been so scared in my life!

And what does it take to release us on this fine day at American Gas? What word? What sign? Only the sound of Michael crying, wailing. Red-faced and tearful, like a newborn babe.

Contributors' Notes

STEVE ALMOND is the author of two story collections, *My Life in Heavy Metal* and *The Evil B.B. Chow*.

WILLIAM J. COBB'S fiction has been published in *The New Yorker*, *Mississippi Review*, *American Short Fiction*, *The Antioch Review*, and many others. He is the author of *The Fire Eaters* and *The White Tattoo*. His new novel, *Goodnight, Texas*, is forthcoming in Fall 2006. He lives in Pennsylvania and Colorado.

JENNY DUNNING'S fiction has appeared recently in *Beloit Fiction Journal* and *Harpur Palate* and she has an essay forthcoming in *Connecticut Review*. She received her M.F.A. from Vermont College and is finishing her Ph.D. in English at Ohio University. Her life is currently packed up in boxes in preparation for moving to Northfield, Minnesota, where she will be an assistant professor in the St. Olaf College English Department.

JOSH EMMONS is completing a novel called *For the Love of God*. A resident of Portland, Oregon, he is the author of *The Loss of Leon Meed*.

W. TSUNG-YAN KWONG is currently a fiction M.F.A. candidate at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. His short stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Glimmer Train*, *New Letters*, *Cimarron Review*, *ZYZZYVA*, *The Madison Review*, and elsewhere.

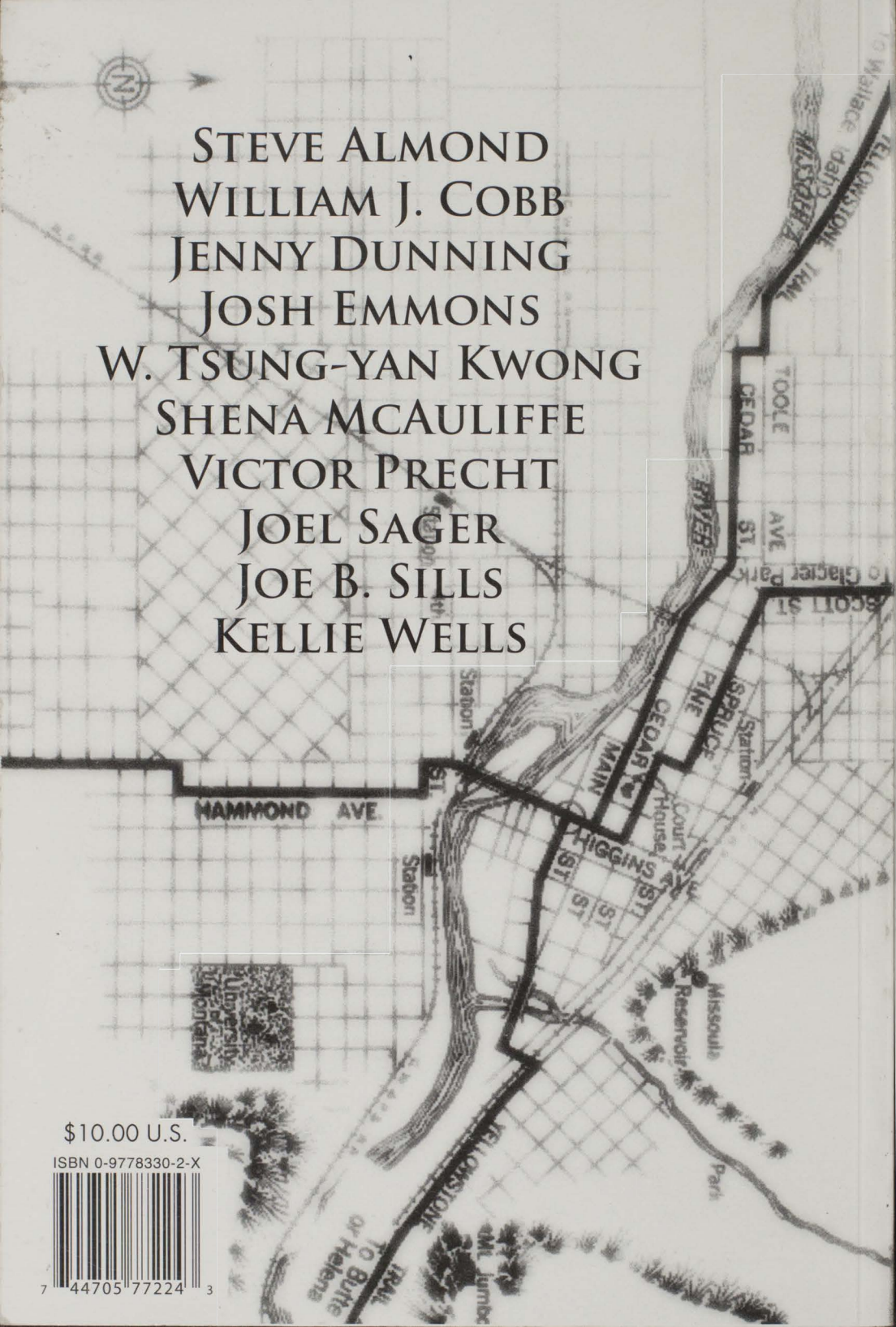
SHENA MCAULIFFE is a recent graduate of the Writing Program at Washington University in St. Louis. She has a story forthcoming in *Land-Grant College Review*.

VINCENT PRECHT'S short stories have appeared in *Western Humanities Review*, *The Seattle Review*, *West Bank*, and *Carolina Quarterly*. A member of Tom Filer's Goat Alley Workshop, he lives in Burbank with his wife Saralynne and son Sullivan.

JOEL SAGER graduated from William Jewell College near Kansas City and attended the Illustration Academy at Virginia Commonwealth University. He lives and paints in Columbia, Missouri, where he helped start a gallery called Poppy Fine Art.

JOE B. SILLS studied fiction at Brown as an undergraduate. He has spent the past year working in Bangkok and is currently elsewhere in Asia.

KELLIE WELLS was awarded the Flannery O'Connor Award and the Great Lakes Colleges Association New Writers' Award for her collection of short fiction, *Compression Scars*. She is also a recipient of the Rona Jaffe Foundation Writer's Award for emerging women writers. Her work has appeared in various journals, including *The Kenyon Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*. Her novel *Skin* was published in 2006 by the University of Nebraska Press in their Flyover Fiction Series, edited by Ron Hansen. She teaches in The Writing Program at Washington University in St. Louis.



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